

Absolute & ABORIGINAL Magnitude & SCIENCE FICTION

Spring 2002

Issue #18

Barry B.
Longyear

Allen
Steele

Uncle
River

Robert A.
Metzger

\$4.95 (3.95 Canada)



Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

As you can see from the cover, we've combined *Absolute Magnitude* and *Aboriginal SF* into one magazine. We did this for a number of reasons. For the last three years DNA Publications, Inc. has had a management contract with the Second Renaissance Foundation to run the business end of *Aboriginal SF*. Due to a number of factors, when that contract ended we decided not to renew it. At that time, The Second Renaissance Foundation decided to close *Aboriginal SF* down rather than try to find another publisher. As a result of this, DNA Publications offered to assume the subscription liability and we also agreed to publish the stories that were in *Aboriginal's* inventory. So rather than pretend that nothing had changed with *Absolute Magnitude* we decided to use both titles. For the next year or two, this magazine will be publishing stories purchased both by myself for *Absolute Magnitude* and by Charles Ryan for *Aboriginal SF*. The stories purchased for the two magazines are close enough in subject matter and scope that I believe that readers of both magazines will be happy with this incarnation.

Well, once again DNA Publications was the only genre magazine company to see any appreciable growth in circulation. All of our magazines' circulation grew by ten percent or more. We saw strong gains on both the newsstand and renewals for *Dreams of Decadence* and *SF Chronicle* when we moved them to their new glossy formats. As a result of that, we made the decision to move the rest of our magazines to glossy formats. We expect to continue improving the quality and visibility of all of our magazines. I want to thank you, our readers, for staying with us through the years: we couldn't be doing this without you.

Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

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Science Fiction

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Just a Touch of Chocolate

by Barry B. Longyear

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It was as if every instant was a gem, each facet of this jewel a window—a unique perspective upon the perfect passage of the life of Billy Gardiner. What a day! As Billy knelt at his bedside, the mint-taste of the toothpaste still in his mouth, freshly bathed and in his pajamas, he thrilled to the knowledge of all that he had seen, been, felt, and experienced since he had awakened. Only one little flaw.

The dreams the night before had been troubling. They always were. And the question was always how to be in two places at the same time—and that other thing he never could remember when he needed to. If He didn't remember the important thing, being in two places at the same time would be for nothing. Then he remembered his mom waking him for the day. The dream was always confusing, but the mornings never were.

His mother's kiss, her smile against the morning sky. "Did the warm milk work?" she asked. "No more bad dreams?"

"I had another bad dream." He frowned for a moment, as if remembering something. "What is it, Billy?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "Chocolate. Maybe if you put some chocolate in the milk."

His mom reached out a hand and tousled his hair. "Time to get up, lazybones. Andy Cort said he'd be by bright and early." And she partly lifted him as she hugged him and kissed his cheek again. "That's just because I love you." One corner of her mouth pulled back in a smile. "I'll think about the chocolate."

After she left his room, Billy's dreams from the night before touched something just out of his awareness. The more he reached for it, the farther away it sat. Then something else from his memory presented itself: the practice! Billy rushed to get dressed.

The smells from the kitchen downstairs: Dad making blueberry pancakes. The perfume of hot butter and maple syrup. Andy would be coming soon, the last baseball practice before the big game between the Flyers and the Rockets, and just a sliver of hope about who would start on the pitcher's mound tomorrow, but he couldn't think about that, because there was a real chance it might happen, and if it didn't happen, he didn't want to have attached all of his happiness on getting it, but he did so want to pitch.

Coach Duggin had told Anthony Ponti that if he didn't get his mind off girls and back on pitching, he might have to make some changes. But the coach was full of empty threats. After all, they were there to have fun. Whatever happened, though, Billy just knew his team, the Flyers, would win. Billy wanted to pitch, though. It shouldn't be, he reminded himself, but to him it was the most important thing in the world. Still, if Coach chose Anthony, Billy wanted his desire for the Flyers to win to be more important than his desire to pitch. If Coach Duggin picked Anthony, Billy decided, he would shake hands with Anthony

and wish him good luck. After making his decision, Billy felt better.

After he threw on his faded jeans and Hershey, PA tee-shirt, he quickly stood before his desk, reached to Granddad's old AM radio, threw two of the switches and twisted the big brown tuning knob all of the way clockwise. Immediately he turned to the empty cardboard box on the top of his dresser, two paces away, jumped toward it and counted: "One thousand—" and then knocked the box to the floor. Still too long, he thought. One thou—is all the time he had. If it takes until one thous-and, well, that was too long. Besides, he'd still have to be near the bed. For some reason he couldn't leave the bed—

"Billy, are you coming down?" called his dad from downstairs.

"In a second," he answered as he picked up the cardboard box and replaced it on his dresser. No need to turn down Granddad's old radio. It didn't work anyway. He grabbed his glove, glanced back at his room, then ran down to breakfast.

Each moment a treasure to grasp, hold, and value. So many things. At breakfast the pancakes were so special, the scoop of whipped butter on top, Dad squeezing Billy's shoulder. "You get 'em today, Tiger. You can do it."

"I'll try my best, Dad."

And Dad leaned over, kissed his cheek, and looked into Billy's eyes. Dad's eyes were gray, the skin a little droopy over the corners, every crease on that face another treasure. "We'll be there, Tiger."

And Billy knew that Dad would be there at the practice, because Dad never broke a promise. Mom would be there, too, because Mom loved to see him play. His older sister, Laura, would be there, as well, because she was so very proud of Billy. She thought Billy was cool, and she would say so to her high school friends. Billy once overheard her say to Stacy Patterson, "My brother is so cool." And that was so cool.

Life was so cool. Almost perfect.

Billy knew that they would all still be there for him even if he didn't get picked to pitch the game with the Rockets. His family didn't love him because he played baseball. And maybe Anthony Ponti's arm would get tired and Billy would pitch a couple of innings. And maybe Coach would pick Billy—

He had to put away such thoughts. You can't hit the ball now if you're off in the future pitching it.

That evening, saying his prayers, Billy placed his palms together and rested his elbows on the edge of the bed, the scenes, the smells, the sounds of the practice still dancing in his memory. The odor of the oil in his glove, the warmth of the sun on the back of his shoulders, the feel of the ball's stitching

Just a Touch of Chocolate

beneath the tip of his index finger as he watched Andy's hand steal into his right thigh and signal three-two for the burner.

Glorious! Billy was so stoked. Three pitches, three strikes, and Andy stood to return the third pitch as the batter left the box. The batter, Jaime Herbert, was shaking his head, but grinning widely, grateful that Billy pitched for the Flyers. Billy had been hot, but so had Anthony Ponti. Anth had kept his mind on the game. He had pitched well.

Coach Duggin took them all across the street to Benny's after practice. Coach believed in ice cream, and Billy went for a black raspberry cone. Andy had chocolate. Once Andy had his chocolate cone, Billy frowned at it, thinking that perhaps he ought to have chocolate, too. He didn't know why, though. Black raspberry was his absolute all-time favorite. There was a reason for the chocolate, though. Just out of his grasp. He put it out of his head and enjoyed his black raspberry cone. The two boys sat on a wooden bench outside in the sun, their backs against the table, looking back at the ball field, neither saying a thing. Why throw words at a perfect moment?

And Coach came over. Coach Duggin was a short, stocky man with thick black curly eyebrows and a face like soft leather. "How's your arm, Billy?"

"Great. It's fine, Coach."

The coach pursed his lips, rearranged the ball cap on his head, and nodded once as he looked back at the ball field. "I want you to start, tomorrow. If you're strong enough, you can pitch the whole game." He faced Billy. "Think you can handle it?"

"Y—Yes sir."

Coach Duggin nodded once more and walked off to talk to one of the parents.

Strong enough? Billy's heart soared. *Strong enough?* Right then he figured he could juggle Volkswagens. He looked at Andy, and his friend was grinning like a fool and sending the high-five in his direction. Their hands met and Andy said, "Billy, you better cover yourself in bubble-wrap. Things are going just a little too good." He nodded to Billy's left. "Laura."

Once again, from Andy's moon-eyed look, Billy confirmed that his best friend was still maintaining his crush on Laura. But Andy was twelve and Laura was seventeen, and even Andy saw a problem with that. Still, as he would say, he could infatuate from afar. Billy turned to his left. Laura stood next to him, looking down. "Coach Duggin told Mom and Dad you'll be pitching tomorrow." She smiled. "We're all going to be there. The whole town. I'm so proud of you." She bent over and kissed Billy's cheek. She stood up, glanced at Andy, blew him a kiss, as well, then turned and went back into Benny's.

"We both better get into the bubble-wrap, man," Andy said to Billy, both of them red-faced. "Things are going way too good."

That night as he clasped his hands before him and looked up at the ceiling and beyond to the realm of his protector, Billy knew that things being too good just wasn't so. There were still the bad dreams. He thanked God for his life, and asked God to bless his family, his friends, his town, his country, and his world. He climbed into bed and looked at Granddad's broken old radio and the cardboard box on top of his dresser near the door as his sister stuck her head in the room to say goodnight.

After Laura said goodnight and his dad kissed him and said goodnight, his mom brought in the mug of warm milk, this time

with just a touch of chocolate syrup. "This ought to take care of all those bad dreams."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Why do you think chocolate will help—or do you just like chocolate?"

"Well, I like chocolate." He smiled.

She kissed him, left the cup of warm milk, closing the door behind her. Billy looked at the cup, the aroma of the chocolate teasing his mind with something—an answer to the bad dreams, perhaps. He took a swallow of the warm milk, leaned back on his pillow, closed his eyes, and savored the chocolate flavor. True, he liked chocolate. Not as much as black raspberry, but he liked chocolate. But there was something about his bad dreams—a feeling, a memory—that the chocolate would help. What it would help he didn't know. He once heard on the Learning channel that chocolate contained a chemical that affected the brain, making the user feel loved, but that was no answer for Billy. Chocolate or no chocolate, he already felt loved. He always felt loved. He finished the warm chocolate milk, let go of the unanswered, and said the only prayer he ever said for himself: "God, help me to become the person I was meant to be."

Then he yawned, stretched, and let sleep pull him into the universe of mists and shadows, the taste of chocolate still on his tongue.

"—awake, now. Come on, Lucas. Relax. Take deep breaths and just ease into consciousness. That was a good session."

"What?"

"You are making excellent progress."

Lucas Strang's heart seemed to fall into the abyss, his life falling away, as he opened his eyes to see the familiar gray interior of the prison psychiatrist's office, the taste of chocolate still on his tongue. It came up in his throat: all of the tears mixed with choking black rage, the realization that existence came in a silver box, time distorted at sixty-to-one: A minute of Lucas Strang's, when he was under, became an hour of Billy Gardiner's. "No!" he growled through clenched teeth.

"Easy, now." The shrink reached out and continued turning the big brown knob on the time distortion modulator counter-clockwise, bringing his patient all the way back into real time. Once the big brown knob was centered, he turned off the two ganged switches to the left of the big brown knob. Lucas reached up to rub the tears from his eyes. He felt, then remembered, the cuff on his left wrist. He reached with his right arm and felt the stainless steel waist strap click as its steel restraint ring welded to the couch frame rattled. He slumped back, the back of his head on the headrest.

TDD Therapy. Time Distortion Dream. What had it been? Twenty—twenty-two hours over the past month. Long enough to see—to feel—Billy Gardiner being born, being held, suckled, loved, and growing into a world of happiness. And all of the time growing in love, in spirit, in knowledge, in confidence, in hope for the future. Each time, ripped from that back to Jessup's office, back to the heart of killer Lucas Strang, then back to his cell to reflect upon a healthy, nurturing, loving childhood, now that he had, at last, witnessed one. The theory was simple: If all you ever see is horror, then horror is normal. Give the patient

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another reference point, then lead him along his own path to find out where his healthy reality lies.

But Lucas's problem wasn't finding his healthy reality. Ever since the treatments had started, ever since he had first awakened to find out he wasn't Billy Gardiner, Lucas Strang's only problem was how to be in two places at the same time. The dream inducement/time distortion console was within reach. The power supply and emergency distortion release chassis, though, was against the wall, near the door. Hit the switches, twist the big knob to the right all the way: 1 Sec = Infinity, and then destroy the emergency release and power supply all the way on the other side of the room. Otherwise they can call you back.

Lucas was attached to the couch. He couldn't reach the door. And then there was something on Lucas's tongue.

Billy had an answer. It had been there all the time, but Billy was the one who had seen it.

"Tell me how you feel, Lucas," Dr. Jessup leaned back from the console, placed his usual cup of hot chocolate on the work surface, glanced down at his note pad, then raised an eyebrow and looked at Lucas.

"Feel?"

"How do you feel? Mad, sad, glad—"

"Right now I'm kinda unhappy. I liked where I was."

"That's understandable."

"Doc, unless you been where I been, you don't understand nothin'."

"In training, I've been Billy Gardiner—"

"No, Doc," Lucas turned, swiveled the waist restraint, sat up and swung his feet to the floor, his left wrist still cuffed to the couch. With his right hand he toyed with the lead to the ribbon antennae that was mounted on his head from temple to temple. "You never been Lucas Strang bein' Billy Gardiner, Doc." He looked up at the psychiatrist. Jessup was slender, balding, an ever-present smile on his face. "You mama tuck you in at night, Doc? Give you great big kisses? You papa help you with you homework? Cheer for you at you baseball games?"

"I admit I had a good childhood, Lucas, but what we're trying to do here is to give you the same foundation so that you can realize your reality: become the person you were meant to be. Do you see?"

Lucas looked at his hands, flexed his fingers, and thought of that thing that Billy couldn't quite remember. Something Lucas was supposed to do—or perhaps it was something he was not supposed to do. He shrugged his answer to the doctor's question.

"The treatment appears to be doing you some good, Lucas," Jessup flipped a form on Lucas's patient file as he sipped at his hot chocolate. "Your headaches have been less frequent and your sheet is clean of disciplinary infractions for the past twenty days." He replaced the cup on the work surface. Lucas noted the cup was still seven-eighths full. "You've had quite a breakthrough this session, Lucas. Do you remember Billy asking God to help you become the person you were meant to be? That's just the first step—"

The red-edged blackness came over Lucas as he thought, *Maybe just one more.*

As quickly as a striking snake, he reached out his right hand and grabbed the psychiatrist by his throat. "Luc—Lucas!" He coughed and almost pulled himself free. "You don't

understand!" the psychiatrist gasped. "Now we can—We can find out who you were meant to—"

Lucas crushed the man's throat, then stopped, allowing the man's limp body to slide from the chair onto the floor. He looked at his hand, wondering why he had stopped. He had never stopped before. Lucas glanced at the clock on the wall above the door. The guard would be in for him within minutes. Bending back to the psychiatrist's still form, Lucas bent over and felt Jessup's neck for a pulse. Still there.

Ah, well, then. That was what Billy couldn't remember to tell him.

Lucas leaned forward, over Dr. Jessup's unconscious form and flipped up the two switches on the TDD console. Picking up the cup of hot chocolate, he reached to the big brown knob and glanced down at the psychiatrist as he heard the guard outside the door punching in the electric lock combination to the room. "You the one who don't understand, Doc. I already am the person I was meant to be. I want to be the person Billy Gardiner was meant to be. He shook his head as a blinding headache made him wince. "Besides, I just gotta pitch tomorrow."

As he turned the big brown knob on the TDD control bank, he tossed the cup of hot chocolate and its contents toward the power supply/emergency distortion release chassis across the room next to the door. Before the cup reached the apex of its trajectory, it slowed, froze, and the universe faded to black.

Her lips were warm on Billy's cheek. As she pulled her face away, his mom looked down into his eyes. "It was just a dream."

He turned to look past his mother's shoulder. There was chocolate milk all over the wall above the dresser next to the door. The cardboard box was on the floor, dented, and splashed with chocolate milk. A good pitch, he thought to himself—for being asleep—and someone else—in another reality.

"I'm sorry about the mess, mom."

"Don't worry about it. You're just anxious about the game tomorrow. Was the dream very bad?"

Billy shook his head, the tears burning his eyes. "It was so awful. An awful life, awful place, the awful things he did, the horrible stuff in his head—"

She shooshed him as she held him and rested his head on her breast. "It was just a dream. Go back to sleep. I'll be right here."

"You're sure, Mom?"

"I'll be here to chase those monsters away all night."

"Just 'til I go to sleep. The bad dream is over." He turned over, let his head sink into his pillow, and pulled the covers up over his shoulder. "I don't think I will ever have a bad dream again."

Billy Gardiner closed his eyes, felt himself start to doze, then jerked himself awake. His mother was still there. He felt her kiss the top of his head, he quickly thanked God again for his life, and hesitantly let himself fall into his own dreams, curious as to where they would take him.



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REHA



Bandwidth to Burn

by Robert A. Metzger

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June 12, 2004

From: redempreh@canegov/svs
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To: Citizen 555-44-3267

As is the duty of all legal citizens of the Republic of California/Nevada, you are being called upon to volunteer in the redemption and rehabilitation of citizen 876-11-3987, in an attempt to return meaning and caring to a citizen when a morally corrupt and degenerate organic society has brutalized. See enclosed file. Thank you for your compliance in this matter. Failure to serve will result in termination of all rights and privileges inherent in Cal/Nev citizenship and disconnection from the System.

Tour of Duty: 1 year.

June 23

"Where do you want the head?"

I squinted, stepping down the morph, stopping only when the cool jungle greens faded into the gray concrete corridor and the vine-choked tree stump planted in front of me blurred into a squat someone clad in a bright orange jumpsuit. Teeth were white, eyes were brown, hairline was receding, nose was large and lopsided. All in all, the absolute immutability of this individual was quite disgusting. It was what it was, totally outside the System, and incapable of modification.

It could not be touched.

It made me nervous, and I wanted it to be gone. But I knew that there would be no getting rid of this individual. No amount of money could cocoon me from this situation, no encrypted files or covert data could be used to manipulate an organic into making this person vanish. Redemp and Rehab was System run—pure code and electrons. The inorganic knew no compassion. The System asked and you obeyed—or else all privileges were suspended.

And that was not an option I was willing to consider. If disconnected, I could not survive. Without connection, I could not access my brain chemistry, could not flood my skull with the happy neurotransmitters that allowed me to open this door and confront this person. I'd be dead in a day if my brain was left to itself, forced to interact directly with reality. Of that I had no doubt.

My nose suddenly twitched, nostrils flaring, strange odors filling my head. Some I recognized, others I couldn't. Today was Wednesday, and no Monday, not the day when foreign smells would drift through my apartment, the telltale remnants of those individuals who would bring in food and fresh clothes during Sunday night downtime. Wednesday was not the time for alien odors, and yet here they were, wafting over me, nearly strangling me. I could detect garlic, sweat, and what was either perfume or aftershave.

Aftershave.

Images surfaced. Uncle's face.

I forced it down—muttering auditory commands, beating it back into the shadows. This situation was bad enough without dredging up the stored memories of actual personal experiences.

"Where do you want the head?"

The synch was outstanding: voice, lip movement, facial muscles twitching, all of it perfectly aligned, seamless, no evidence of multitrack patching. Reality was disgusting, but there was no getting around the fact that it had bandwidth to burn. I glanced past his shoulder and down the gray concrete corridor. Ugly. Shadowless, the corridor and the dull steel doors embedded in its walls seemed to extend forever, eventually fading away in a harsh fluorescent haze. My hands were balled into fists. The thump of pounding blood filled my ears. I refocused on the situation facing me, snorting another lungful of hallway air. It seemed likely that the source of the odors and this person were one and the same.

"This head is heavy."

The person held up a gray box. I had not seen that. It was larger than a head, but of course it would need to be. It was a portable unit, full of life support—gulping little pumps to force goo in and out of the head, and bundles of twittering fibers to access the System. Technicians had invaded my home the week before, installing System links and plumbing in the goo and waste lines that would be needed to keep the head functioning. I had managed to escape direct personal contact with those individuals, having self-medicated to oblivion proportions, but there was no escaping this person and the head that was contained in the box. The System demanded a minimal level of consciousness for this encounter.

I did not speak to the person—no overload of neurotransmitters would be sufficient to make me talk to a stranger at my front door. But I did manage a few not totally random head movements and hand gestures, and as I backed into my apartment, the person entered after me. I pointed in the direction of the kitchen to my left, and then, scurried off to the right into my bedroom and I dropped onto my bed. I pulled my knees up to my chest, lowered my head, and rocked back and forth.

"I can't do this," I whispered.

"And just what are your options?"

I looked up. Lauren leaned against the far wall. Dressed in a floor-length black evening gown, red heels and white elbow-length gloves, she took a long drag on the black-lacquered cigarette holder clenched between her teeth, then expelled twin tendrils of gray smoke from the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were half open, her face a mask of disinterest and uninvolvedness.

She was beautiful.

She was Lauren Bacall.

Input into the neuro-morphic chips wedged in my retinas, she seamlessly morphed into the room. Seeing her relaxed me, pulled me down a few notches. She was the best that money could buy, a top of the line agent, one of the perks available for those such as I who

Absolute Magnitude

were deemed indispensable at Allied Entertainment. I'd synthesized her myself while under studio contract, but retained a 49% interest, including all product endorsement and cortical overlays. Money had ceased being an issue in my life. Actually, almost everything had ceased being an issue. I worked, burned calories, took in food, put out waste, scheduled downtime, and interfaced with Lauren. It was what I wanted. It was all I could handle. But all that had come to an abrupt end. A head had just taken up residence in my kitchen.

"What are your options, Tommy?"

I shook my head. There were any number of ways to flatline—a half-dozen different ways to painlessly shut down my autonomic nervous system. Good night and never wake up. It was that, or *interact* with the head—redeem and rehabilitate a five-kilogram refugee from a liquid nitrogen vat. Those were my options: shutdown, or day in and day out interaction with a chunk of self-aware *organic* plugged into my kitchen. My teeth began to chatter and my fingertips to tingle. I whispered a few auditories, and my brain attempted to rebalance. I could only push my neural chemistry so hard. Too far and snap. My teeth stopped chattering, but a dull ache filled my head.

Neurons were firing. *Sizzle, sizzle, sizzle.*

I had not spoken with an *organic* in more than five years, not willing to risk the chaotic, totally uncontrollable outcome that such encounters were prone to result in. I operated through synthetics, agents, and fibers, insulated and protected from *organics* and the insanity that accompanied them. I was safe. But now a head had come to live with me. If I could not redeem and rehabilitate it within the one-year tour of duty, I would be disconnected from the System, nirvana-sized from my job at the studio, dumped from my Citizenship, and forced to reenter the *organic* world.

"I have no options," I said.

Lauren offered me a patented Lauren-smirk, flicked her cigarette holder, dropping a gray ash that vanished before it hit the floor, and then slinked her way across the carpet and toward me. She smelled like violets, courtesy of my olfactory implant. She leaned down and looked at me. Her eyes now radiated warmth and desire.

I was good with eyes.

"You haven't even scanned the head's file." I had no secrets from Lauren. She received all the inputs I did. "I suggest that you do it," she said in a whisper. Those eyes were suddenly cold and hard. "Dead would not suit you."

"All installed and ready to go!"

I jumped off the bed, walked to the bedroom doorway, turned around, shuffled back toward the bed, stopped, and then walked toward the door again.

"He's eager to meet you!"

He. No. I did not want to know. It was not a he, but a head, a chunk of personless *organic*. It was not a person. I could not have a person living in my house. "No!" I screamed, as I felt my neural chemistry unbalance, pushed just too far. I stepped back, slammed

the door and stumbled across the bedroom and into the bathroom. Nothing could make me go, nothing could make me look into its eyes, smell its rotting skin, listen to its synthetic voice. I would not. "No!" I shoved my right hand into the med socket in the wall. "Anesthetize!" I shouted. Warmth ran up my arm and down my shoulder. The room clouded, my feet tingled. I could not feel my tongue or fingers.

My brain blissfully disintegrated.

June 25

"Get your psycho, son-of-a-bitch ass in this kitchen!"

I sat on my bed. I was hungry, my stomach hurt, my head buzzed, and my eyes stung. I had not left my bedroom since the head had arrived. It screamed and screamed and did not seem to sleep. And I could not sleep. I could not think. I could barely breathe. But I was still alive. That I could not understand, could not really believe. I looked around once more. My room had become nothing but walls, a bed, a dresser, and a painting showing a matador flashing a red cape in front of a bull. The painting hurt my eyes, burned in my head. It was painted on velvet. It was grotesque, disgusting, physically nauseating. I had had no idea that it had actually been in my room. I closed my eyes. I could keep them open for only short intervals; the harsh, cold, and unchanging three-dimensional reality that assaulted them was just too much to continually feed into my brain. It was all so real.

After the first day of screaming, I knew that I could not survive the year, could not redeem the ranting chunk of rotting meat plugged into my kitchen. Never. I attempted to shutdown, accessing my flatline files. And that had triggered something *horrible*. I was disconnected from both the System and my own neural chemistry. The System had lied, cheated me, revoking Citizenship simply because I had attempted to flatline. Reality engulfed me. I fell back on the bed, dizzy, something invisible squeezing my chest. An ugly brown-gray water stain covered the ceiling.

"Do it now, crazy boy!"

"Please," I whispered, as I continued to stare up at the never before seen ceiling. "Please leave me alone."

"He will not leave you alone."

I turned my head toward my left. Lauren sat next to me. She was all that remained, my only link to a life that had ceased to exist 24 hours ago. Her lips were impossibly red, her skin the color of milk, her eyes hidden behind smoked glasses. A shiny steel stud pierced her right earlobe—totally out of character. Without me to anchor her, she was already starting to drift. An agent needed a master, and I certainly needed an agent.

"Make it be quiet," I begged.

Lauren shook her head. "He will not go away, will not be quiet, will not leave you alone until you speak with him. I scanned his file. He is *incurable*."

I shivered. I tried to faint, but could not quite manage it, the room momentarily darkening, something buzzing in my ears, and my



Bandwidth to Burn

vision tunneling. But then reality reasserted itself. I was staring at my hands. My fingernails were caked with grime.

"It's failed redemption before?" I asked, looking back at Lauren.

She nodded her head. She held up a thick bundle of papers that had not been in her hands a moment before. "Terrance T. Barker is a special case, a very angry case."

I didn't want to hear this, didn't want to hear anything.

"Out here now, you scum-sucking maggot!" it screamed from the kitchen.

"He has been sequenced through 22 different reeducation and redemption periods. He has proven to be incorrigible, refuses to accept his situation or to reintegrate into society," said Lauren.

That was impossible. Heads were short-termers. Between the effects of freezer burn and post-reanimation depression, they rarely lasted for more than five years. Only a truly defective head could last for 22 years.

"Do it now, shit for brains!"

"Terrance Barker had been in the Marine Corps of the United States of America, stationed in Tehran, Iran, during the summer of 2005. Due to what transpired that summer, the records here are not complete. He was a captain assigned to an intelligence unit. His family was stationed with him, north of the city, at Schwarzkopf Air Force Base."

That meant something, but I could not remember what.

"His family was carbonized in the blast. He was 40 kilometers away in downtown Tehran. Fallout was minimal, but his body was crushed and burned when a building collapsed on him. The United States of America declared him a hero. There is some reference to the saving of children, repeatedly going in and coming out of a burning building." She grimaced and her nose crinkled, as if she'd just smelled something spoiled. "His world, and the people of his time, did not possess the compassion to let him die. Driven by guilt and weakness, they severed his head from his body and *tanked* him."

The *organics* of his time would not let him die. The *inorganics* of my time would not let me die. Nothing had really changed.

"Reanimated in 2071, he has lived with 22 different volunteers. He is incorrigible, angry, and will not accept what has happened to him. The pain he feels, he insists on sharing with those that he lives with. He is a cruel and twisted man." Lauren smiled, as if something in that description attracted her—the response an obvious core-personality breach. Lauren was seriously drifting.

"What is wrong with you, you psycho bastard. I've accessed you, seen what you are, know you for the sorry sack of shit that you are!" screamed the head.

"Accessed me?"

Lauren nodded. "He has *full* System access. I've been monitoring him closely. For the past 48 hours his actions have consisted of only two activities—screaming, and scanning any records associated with you."

"Get out here now, sicko!" demanded the head.

"Does he know?"

Lauren nodded her head.

"What was it like to kill your entire family?" shouted the head.

"No!" I shrieked. I was off the bed and running, hurling the door open, stumbling down the hallway, grabbing onto the kitchen doorway, pulling myself through, and then sliding across the slick tile floor. I stopped, dropping to my knees.

"The killer finally makes his appearance."

It was mounted on a white porcelain platform that was wedged between the sink and the toaster. Gray-pink head, hairless, showing white bone in places, crisscrossed with brown scar tissue in others, it was grotesque—an *organic* nightmare. The left ear was a melted nub, the nose smashed and pushed to the left, and a chunk of the chin missing. Mirrored glasses covered its eyes—widespectrum System access units. Its jaw hung slack, the mouth open, stainless steel teeth and gray gums exposed. A long line of drool ran down its chin, pooling on my countertop.

"What's wrong, killer, never seen a war hero before?" asked a voice that came from a speaker grill in the base of the platform. "We should get along just fine, having so much in common. After all, we both killed our families."

No. No. No. Uncle's face—defiant, certain, always so certain. Aunt Ruth, Amy, and Jared. The creak and crackle of sheet metal warping in the intense heat. Glass shattering. The too-hot lighter in my hand.

"I didn't kill them!"

"That's what all the psychopaths say," it snapped back at me.

As I continued to stare at the head, it moved, shuddered, rising up, exposing a neck locked into a stainless steel collar, and beneath the collar, pumping pneumatics, moving polished steel, and what looked like claws. The head pushed itself up out of the platform, moving on crab legs. It scuttled off the platform and lurched across the kitchen counter, dragging behind it a metallic umbilical that snaked back to its porcelain base.

"Don't worry, killer," it said with a raspy voice that now came from where its crab-legs joined its collar. "We've got a year to get to the bottom of all this." It jumped off the counter, hit the floor, and began to crawl toward me.

I moved, ran, probably screamed.

I was in my room, back to the door, crouched on the floor.

"That Lauren is quite the tasty one, killer. You doing that little virtual bitch, or can I make my move? Wouldn't want to encroach on my new roommate's territory."

I didn't kill anyone. I loved my family. They loved me.

"Come out and play with me, killer."

Scratching metallic sounds came through the door. I jumped up, certain that the thing was about to burrow through the door. I ran across the room, crawled under my bed, closed my eyes, and screamed. I screamed, and I screamed, and I screamed, until I could hear nothing, nothing at all, nothing but the sound of crackling flame, the hiss of steam, and their screams.



Absolute Magnitude

July 12

I shoved food into my mouth, and my jaw worked on it, my tongue moving it back and forth and then eventually pushing it down my throat. I was eating. I had no choice. It was one of the few ways that I could shut the damn thing up. If I ate, if I drank, if I slept, if I brushed my teeth, it would shut up, stay locked onto its platform, and leave me alone. But right now I was doing a lot more than just eating. I was getting ready. My right hand was shoved in my pajama pocket, my fingers wrapped around the handle of a knife. This nightmare was about to end.

"Tommy, don't be mad at me, I had no choice."

I glared at Lauren. No more sequined gowns. No more elbow-length gloves. No more shoulder length flowing hair. Dressed in skin-tight black plastic, her once chestnut hair was now blood red and spiked. A gold stud ran through her left cheek, and Bronx tribal tattoos cut across her forehead. Traitor. It had full control over her. She spent all her time with it, stroked its burned skin, whispered into its nub ear, was cussing its pocket checks. She had been transformed into an early 21st-century nightmare for its amusement.

"You've been disconnected," she said. "But I still need you, want you, but I can only be here at his wish," she said while fingering the stud embedded in her face. "If I don't obey, don't do just what he says, I will be disconnected, without even reality to fall back on."

Lucky for her. I just shrugged and continued to chew on what might have been meat or broccoli. I held on tightly to the knife.

"You about done there, killer man?"

I didn't look, but could hear it move, that sound of claws clattering across the countertop unmistakable. It hit the floor, sounding like crashing pots and pans, and then scuttled over to the kitchen table. I chewed, clutched my knife, and waited. I should have done this a week ago.

But a week ago I could not get close enough to the thing to stab it—brain and body just wouldn't cooperate. I'd either run, puke, or pass out if I got too near it. But no longer. The fear had lessened as the hate had grown. This chunk of thawed meat had destroyed my life, disconnected me from the System, and taken Lauren.

"Got nothing to say, killer?"

Oh, I had plenty to say. But not quite yet. I would talk to the thing in a language that it could understand. The head scuttled up the vacuum cleaner that it had leaned against the side of the kitchen table, jumped onto the tabletop, and then squatted on the place mat that it had set across from my seat. "I can't expect much in the way of redemption if you never talk to me, you psychotic piece of shit," The muscles around its face twitched. It did that whenever it tried to smile. "Talk to me!"

I jumped up.

I pulled the knife from my pocket.

"Talk to this!" I screamed.

I stabbed down, putting all my weight in it, the blade aimed for the top of its head, right at a shiny patch of skull. But my hand jerked to the left, muscles twitching and pulling in my arm. The blade struck the table top, going in deep.

"Nice try, killer. But you just don't seem to get what's going on here. Even though you don't have any access to the System, the

System has full access to you. It will not let you hurt yourself, or me. You've got me here for one full year. You will talk to me, interact with me, share your deepest fears, hopes, and thoughts with me. I want to know you better than you know yourself. It is the hope of the System that by understanding the wondrous little life that you carved out for yourself, I may see the path that I might take."

My fingers, controlled by something remote, uncured themselves from the knife. My knees gave way, and I fell back into the seat.

"Is that it, killer?"

"Go to hell!" I screamed, the force of the words tearing at my throat, my gut tightening, spasming, a torrent of whatever it had been that I had just been eating spewing out, burning my mouth, bringing tears to my eyes, and then splashing across the table and splattering the head.

"Congratulations, the killer has found his voice." Brown-yellow liquid, thick and ropy, dripped from the head.

"Go to hell!" I screamed again, stood, and ran to my bedroom, slamming the door so hard, pushing it with such force, that the doorjamb cracked, wood splintering. "Go to hell!" I screamed once more as I slid to the floor.

"Been there! Done that!" it shouted after me.

August 18

I'd grown a beard. There was an ulcer-like sore on my right forearm that wouldn't seem to heal. I sat on the couch, sinking deep, my feet propped up on a pile of old magazines that smelled like mildew and piss. My eyes were barely open, just enough to make the head believe that I was awake, listening. I'd heard this story before, heard it countless times before. I'd heard all the stories before. This was one small slice of reality that no longer had any terror associated with it. All that remained was boredom.

The head was perched on the top of my long dead tri-vid, its crab-legs pointing and gesturing, while Lauren alternated between playing with the knitting needle that she repeatedly ran in and out of her left nostril and stroking the head as she smiled at it with those loving eyes, all the while blowing little heart-shaped smoke rings in its direction.

"There never was a boy like mine," said the head. "What a little manipulator that son of a bitch was. He had his mom and dad by the short hairs and knew just how to pluck them out. Picture this, if you will," it said while pointing a crab leg at me, "we were surrounded by hordes of howling Shiites, Arabs at me, we were surrounded by the pimples on the our asses, Holy Landers were using those slingshots of theirs to hurl rotted pig bits infected with neo-anthrax at us, but me and the boy didn't give a rat's ass. We just played ball, ate our pork-rinds, and let the oil-asses do their Muslim thing, knowing that we'd soon be back in the good ol' USA. We had plans."

I nodded.

Yes, the head had had plans. I'd heard this countless times.

"Have I shown you my boy?" it asked.

Yes, I had seen the boy, had the image seared into my skull. He was a little scrawny boy with scabby knees, sandy hair, eyes that

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twinkled, teeth that gleamed. He was the all-American boy, with a slab of apple pie in one hand and a plastic AK-47 in the other. He was also one of about 100,000 that had been turned into radioactive dust.

"I've seen him," I said, knowing that it would do no good.

"Well, let me show you just what he looked like," it said. My neck automatically turned in the direction of the Display wall, knowing what would appear, knowing just what would be smiling down at me. I knew.

Light flashed, an image materialized. For just a moment, I saw the boy smiling at me, but there was something wrong, something not right. The eyes were dark, recessed, hidden, full of hate and fear. The face was fat and flushed, thick, the hair across the head cut too close. The face had a mustache and the heavy dark shadow of a closely razored beard. *I could smell the aftershave.*

I stood, blinking, my heart pounding, my hands suddenly wet and cold.

"Now how did that get in there?" asked the head.

I barely heard the head speak.

"Relax, Tommy," said Lauren. "Sit back down."

I would not sit, would not relax. I wanted to throw something, hurl it, smash things, put my heel right through the head's face. But I couldn't. I stood, staring into my Uncle Owen's face, trying to will my heart to stop beating.

"Sorry about that, Tommy," said the head. "Seems like I've gotten my files mixed up. I must have inadvertently pulled up my *Religious Maniac* file."

I heard the words, but couldn't quite understand them. Those eyes in that face stared at me, pushing me down, forcing me to my knees. I pressed my hands together, and my lips twitched, trying to spit out a prayer.

"A mighty man, your uncle. Twenty years of preaching netted him nearly 30 half-wit followers, an orphaned nephew, a rusted-out trailer, five gallons of gasoline, and the unwavering conviction that Satan himself was going to arrive on December 12, 2070."

Hot tears ran down my face.

"Quite a guy, making sure that all those good people didn't have to face that old evil Satan. How was it that you didn't participate in that last big barbecue, Tommy?"

I blinked. Uncle moved. Stepping from the wall, he came toward me. "You sinner, you spawn of Satan!" he screamed, his face turning almost tomato red. "There will be no redemption for you!"

"Of course, I forgot," said the head. "Every barbecue needs a cook. Wasn't that your job, Tommy?"

I fainted.

October 3

"I just love this game," said the head, as it jumped back and forth on its hind legs, positioning itself in the open doorway. "You remember the rules, don't you, Tommy?"

I was not paying much attention to the head. Instead, I alternated between watching Uncle Owen and looking down the long hallway. Both made me sweat, both made my heart race, both made me want to vomit. My uncle leaned against the wall. Dressed in a starched

white shirt, bright red suspenders, and sharkskin slacks that looked painted on, showing every blubbery contour beneath, he smiled at me. A hand-made crucifix dangled from a gold chain hanging around his neck. I'd made that crucifix when I was only 12, carved it myself. I remembered that, remembered the pain of holding the knife with a broken hand, my uncle having smashed three fingers with a baseball bat because I'd reached for something across the kitchen table rather than ask for it to be passed.

Of course my uncle was not really there. The image was being fed directly into my neomorphic chips, and from there into my brain. He was not real. He was *more* than real. He was in my head.

"He's an addleheaded fool," said my uncle, his expression full of disgust. "You'll have to tell him again and again, and then there's still no guarantee. He's just as likely to shit in his pants as to do what he's told." My uncle ran his hands across the well-worn spine of his bible. "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. St. Luke 12:20." He licked his fat lips.

"Amen," said the head, who turned from my uncle to face me.

"The rules are simple. You are to pull a number out of the hat held by my beautiful assistant." He pointed a claw at Lauren. Today's motif consisted of radiation burns, cataract-hazed eyes, and fingers melted back to stumps. She said nothing—her lips were welded together with scabs. She held a large black bowler hat full to the brim with slips of paper. "That number will correspond to a room number of one of the sad sacks of shit who occupy this lovely apartment building of yours. You are to go to that door, knock, and if someone actually answers, you are to invite them back here for lunch."

The head's chin quivered in delight.

My uncle laughed, his jowls jiggling and tears welling up in his eyes.

What remained of Lauren's face was expressionless.

"Remember, no fainting, no puking, no stammering, and no peeing in your pants. If you fail to follow these rules, you will be punished."

I looked up at my uncle. He'd stopped stroking the spine of his bible and was now licking his lips. "I'll do it to you good, boy. You know that I know how."

I breathed deep, concentrated, tried not to shake, managed not to faint. My uncle knew how to punish. Reaching out, I grabbed a slip of paper out of the hat, slowly unfolded it, and read it aloud. "H-1368."

"Good one," said the head. "It's at the far end of the hallway."

I stared down the hallway, past the nearly infinite number of doors. The hallway looked kilometers long. This was the 16th time we'd played the game. I hadn't been able to get out the door on the first six attempts, had been unable to knock on any doors on the next seven attempts, and had only been able to knock on the doors the two last times. No one had answered. I had never refused to at least try. The punishment was severe enough for failing—the soles of my feet and my back were still tender, the welts across my chest still red. I did not want to find out what the punishment would be for not trying.

Absolute Magnitude

"Good-bye, boy." My uncle had undone his belt and was pulling it out of its pant loops. I held my breath, stepped over the head, and stood in the hallway. As always, it was the sight of my uncle undoing his belt that had the power to propel me out of the apartment. The door slammed behind me.

For a moment, the hallway seemed to list from side to side as the walls and ceiling shuddered and then began to close in on me. I shut my eyes and started to walk forward. I breathed once, then twice. My feet continued to move. I didn't stumble, didn't fall. I opened my eyes and kept moving. I was already at the first door, H-1322. I had a long way to go. My knees quivered, and I lurched to the wall, holding on for support.

My uncle's laughter echoed down the hallway.

That was enough. I straightened myself, stood, and started walking. Sweat ran into my eyes, my breathing was quick and shallow, and a high-pitched squeal filled my ears, but I kept walking. The numbers ticked by. Up ahead lay H-1368. Experience had taught me not to hesitate, not to stand in front of the door and contemplate what might lie behind it, what might answer. I reached out, rapping on the door before I even stood in front of it. I began to silently count down. If no one answered in ten seconds I could turn and run, return to my apartment, return to safety, and not get punished. But I had to wait ten seconds. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two ...

"Stop watching me!" screamed a voice from behind the door.

Startled, shocked, I stepped back, tripped, and landed on the floor.

"Why won't you stop watching me?"

"Hello," I managed to whisper.

"Don't look! Don't look! Please stop hurting me!"

I then heard the crash of breaking glass, a distant scream, and the slamming of a door. Then silence. I picked myself up and ran for my apartment, and found for the first time that instead of just concentrating on finding my door, on thinking about the safety of my bedroom, I wondered who had been behind the door at H-1368. Why had they screamed? Who or what had been watching that person? I looked from side to side, passing door after door, suddenly realizing that *people* lived behind those doors.

I had never seen anyone in this long hallway in all the times that I'd been forced down it. I had never seen a door open except for mine. What was this place? I reached my door, turned the knob, pushed it open, and ran inside. My uncle and Lauren were gone. I looked in the kitchen. The head was back on its platform. It rotated itself, angling in my direction. "Actually got one of the howlers to come to the door," it said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

The head pushed itself up, extending to its full height. "Torturing you, killing time, seeing if I can turn what little gray matter you have left into tapioca." Its chin quivered in a laugh. "Basically, just having a good ol' time, waiting for you to flash out so I can move on to a new roommate."

I shook my head.

Something had suddenly changed, something brought on by that screaming voice behind the door. Just a few months ago, that had been me. And now I was in the hallway, knocking on doors, talking to heads, disconnected but surviving.

"What is this place?"

"First intelligent question I've heard from you, dipshit. The official designation for this place is *Emotionally Challenged Hospice # 7856*."

Hospice? I didn't understand. A hospice was a place for the dying.

"Don't yet get it, brain-boy? Excuse the pun, but *you* are the head-case here, so screwed up, your mind so twisted and bent, that there is no recovery for you. The all-compassionate society that you grew up in could not bear to see you in any further pain, so they tossed you in these pleasant surroundings, gave you enough System access to trunk an elephant, slammed the door shut to your apartment, and hoped that you'd have the good graces to quickly drop dead and make room for the next head-case."

I blinked, several times.

"This is the nut house for the terminal y insane!" shouted the head.

I turned and walked toward my bedroom door. Lauren stood in the hallway. The early 21st-century neo-punk motif was gone, and once again she was wearing a slinky evening gown. I looked right past her, and then walked right through her.

November 27

"I know this is tough for you, but I'm not going to let you get out of it. I am not a nice guy. I have no compassion. I do not feel sorry for you. As far as I'm concerned, the more pain you feel the better."

I was not looking at Barker. I was barely even listening to him.

Uncle was strapped to the table—thick ropes tied around wrists and ankles. He was frightened, his pig-eyes wide, almost all white. He squealed and grunted, fought against his ropes. "Let me up, boy!" he screamed.

I took a step back. Blood pounded in my ears. I had to keep reminding myself that he was tied to the table, could not get to me, could not touch me, could not take off that belt and whip it across my back.

He couldn't make me hurt anyone.

"Be quiet," I said in a whisper, wincing as I said it, certain that the words would so enrage him that he'd break his ropes and come lunging at me.

"You will burn in Hell for this!"

"You know the drill," said Barker from behind me. "Just keep in mind what the fat degenerate son of a bitch has done to you. Hold those images in your head. Feel that belt across your back. Feel those hands groping your body."

I twitched, head to butt. Images flashed through my head.

"No," I whimpered, as I turned to look back at Barker.



Bandwidth to Burn

He scuttled across the floor, stopping when he was within claw-length of my left foot. "I know that you don't have the guts to do it yet. I know that you won't allow yourself to do what needs to be done. But just go through the motions, let the muscles work, let the signals flow into your brain."

I turned back around and lost control of my arms, the System taking over, moving my arms high above my head. My hands were clenched together, the handle of the baseball bat wedged between them.

"You can't do it, you worthless piece of shit!" screamed Uncle Owen. "You wouldn't dare touch me, can't possibly hurt me. You have no power, you have no strength. You have absolutely nothing. You are worthless. You are nothing. You are ..."

My arms swung down.

The bat caught Uncle Owen square in the left side of the head, cracking bone and rupturing his eyeball. There wasn't even a scream, just the feeling of moving the bat through shattering bone and soft brain.

"Not bad," said Barker.

The bat fell from my hands, and I slowly turned around and trudged back to my bedroom. I was exhausted. This was the seventh time today that I had bludgeoned Uncle Owen to death. It wasn't even lunchtime yet.

January 12

The elevator was comforting—a small, safe box. The orange jumpsuit hung on me, not fitting right, the shoulders loose, while too tight across the gut. It even itched. I tried to concentrate on the ill-fitting jumpsuit, and not on what would happen when the elevator doors opened. Fifteen floors did not take very long—not nearly long enough.

Barker materialized in front of me, hovering in midair—he could not physically leave the apartment, tied to his life support platform through the umbilical cord. This image fed into my neuromorphic chips as all he could manage. "I think you can do it this time," he said.

"Never happen."

I turned to my left. Uncle Owen stood there. His face was swollen, bruised, actually misshaped from the beatings that I'd given him. He took a half step toward me. I took a full step back. "You can't do it, boy. I know you. Just because you can wander up and down the hallway, knock on the doors of the other inmates, and give me a few licks doesn't mean a thing. You are defective and damaged. There is no way that you can actually go outside, stand under that infinite sky, and let the sunlight hit your face."

I swallowed hard and consciously slowed my suddenly too-fast breathing.

"You've tried it nearly a dozen times," he said. "You can't get out of the lobby. You'll never get out of here, never escape me."

The elevator stopped, and the door opened. I stepped back, stopping only when my back hit the cold wall. The lobby spread out before me—an expanse of marble floor, surrounded by clear glass

walls. There were voices. Others in orange jumpsuits walked by. Several approached the far doors, those embedded in the glass walls.

The doors opened.

Outside.

It was too bright, too big, too open.

"Can't even get outside the elevator," said my uncle with a laugh.

I looked at his sneering, fat face. I looked at the bruises, the broken nose, the scabs across his forehead. I had put those there. I stepped forward, out of the elevator and onto the marble floor. The heels of my boots made a hard clacking sound, echoing.

"You'll never make it!" screamed Uncle Owen from behind.

"Just concentrate," said Barker, still hovering in front of me. "One step at a time. If you get in trouble, there are people here to help you. They're watching, making certain that you'll be okay."

I did a quick left-right and then center again. I'd seen them. They were watching, waiting, four in orange jumpsuits.

"Count it down," said Barker.

I had already been counting.

"12," I whispered as my right foot hit the floor.

"Never happen, you degenerate little fool!" screamed my uncle.

"18," I said.

Beyond the glass wall lay a large expanse of green—what was obviously grass. It was dotted with benches, trees, and walking people. Beyond that were more buildings and blue sky. I could hear a noise, a hum, what quickly sounded like a roar—an entire city alive beyond those glass walls.

"27."

Someone stepped in front of me. A woman. Short blond hair. She smelled like strawberries. "Excuse me," she said as she passed in front of me and kept walking.

"34," I replied as I kept walking.

The glass doors were in front of me. I knew at what point they would open, would sense my presence and fly open, exposing me to what lay beyond. I knew, had been here before.

"45."

The doors slid open.

My fingers tingled. My peripheral vision darkened. Sweat rolled down my forehead. I kept moving, kept putting one foot in front of the other. Voices, laughter, smells from decades before—fresh-cut grass, flowers, moist air—all of it washed over me.

I passed through the doors.

A breeze struck my face, pushed my hair back, and then felt as if it peeled the skin from my head and sunk its cold dead fingers right through my skull.

I fainted.

March 18

"Aren't you going to eat?" asked Lauren.

I shook my head.

I couldn't eat. My stomach was tied in a knot. I held the sandwich in my right hand—wedges of cheese and something meat-like protruded from it. A wave of nausea rolled over me, so I looked



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away. Lauren sat across from me, nibbling on her sandwich. Her floral-pattern sundress spread out around her, hiding her legs, which were folded beneath her. She was a vision—both literally and figuratively.

The sun beat down on us. White clouds, a few tinted gray, floated above in the light blue sky. The breeze, which only a month before had paralyzed me with fear, now played against the side of my face, warming me, almost caressing me.

Barker sat on the far end of the blanket, the familiar line of drool pooling beneath him. I was outside, seated on this blanket, having this picnic. Lauren, of course, was nothing more than silicon and code, while Barker was trapped back in the apartment. I glanced around. People in orange jumpsuits walked through the park, mixed with a few non-Hospice residents dressed in colorful pastels. A few of the pastel-clad glanced at me, but would then quickly look away. I know what they saw—some pathetic Emotionally Challenged having a picnic by himself, talking and gesturing to whatever was input into his neuromorphic chips.

"This is the world?" I asked as I waved a hand around my head, pointing at the park, the people, and the buildings.

"Part of it," said Barker, "a small and insignificant part—a pleasant, clean, law and order maintained piece," he said, sounding bitter.

I found myself eating the sandwich. The meat was roast beef, and the cheese, cheddar. It tasted good. "Not a part that you approve of?" I asked.

Barker's chin quivered in laughter. "You know damn well that none of this perfect and sanitized landscape is mine. What I am, and what I once was, is nearly a century dead. I am a soldier in a world without wars. I am crude, unfeeling, belligerent, hostile—a barbarian in the world of the civilized. I hate your world."

My world.

Chirp. Chirp. Chirp.

I turned. A bluebird stood less than a meter away, cocking his head back and forth, obviously eyeing my sandwich. I knew what to do, remembered from so long ago. I pulled off a piece of bread and tossed it near the bird. It hopped over to it, cocked its head one more time, and then bent down for it.

Thud.

The boot seemed to materialize from nowhere. It smashed the bird, grinding it into the grass, feathers and bloody guts squirting out from beneath the boot's thick heel. I looked up. There stood Uncle Owen, his face full of a big smile, showing me his white block teeth.

The blue skies, the white clouds, the gentle breeze, the soft blanket, and the green grass seemed to vanish. A part of me knew they were still there, knew that this degenerate psychopath not only did not have the power to interfere with reality, but did not really exist at all. But that was just a small part—the rational, analytic part. The rest of me, made up of those parts that lived in the past and covered in my apartment, could see nothing except for Uncle Owen.

I hated him.

I reached into the picnic basket and pulled out the pistol—a big, dark .45 caliber handgun. It fit perfectly in my hand.

"I'm so afraid," said Uncle Owen, teasing me, the grin on his face widening. "Am I supposed to believe that at you are going to use that gun on me? I know you, boy. I know what fills your head. You are a coward, a degenerate, an evil little boy without a voice or even the power to save a defenseless little bird."

Just to emphasize that, he ground the bird and his boot deeper into the grass.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

I held up the gun, aimed at his forehead, and squeezed the trigger. I did not hesitate, did not have to think about it. The bang echoed throughout the park, the recoil kicking my hand back. The grin still filled his face. In his forehead was a ragged hole out of which gushed a torrent of blood. His eyes glazed and he toppled over backward.

I looked around the park. People walked, continued with their own picnics, and the clouds floated by. It was as if none of this had just happened, as if I had not shot my uncle in the head. But of course, I hadn't.

None of that was real.

The fat corpse lay in the grass. A pair of System-generated birds, big black ugly crows, descended on him, pecking at his eyes. I looked away and dropped the gun back into the picnic basket.

Lauren continued to eat her sandwich. She smiled at me. "A simply wonderful day," she said.

"When does it end?" I asked Barker. "How many times do I need to shoot him? How many times do I have to crack his skull with a baseball bat? How many times do I have to kill him before he is really dead?"

"What do I look like, boy, the answer man?" answered Barker. "Remember who and what you're talking to. I'm just a head—a refugee from a time and

place that your world no longer has any room for. You have to look after me for a year, do your time with the degenerate old organic from the crazy days, and then pass me off to some other sorry bastard and get on with your life. I don't know a damn thing."

I looked into Barker's yellow-tinted eyes. I tried to see behind them.

Barker knew a great many things. Of that I had no doubt.

May 18

I was exhausted, shaking, breathing hard. Nearly 50 kilometers from my apartment, we were up in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. A bus had taken us most of the way, a bus full of laughing, talking, jostling organics escaping the city for a day in the mountains. The bus had brought us almost all the way. The last two or three kilometers we had to walk.

The air was crisp, tasted fresh. The skin on my arms was pink—sunburned.

I continued to pant like a dog, crouching down, almost on all fours. Barker had been taking me throughout the city for nearly two



Bandwidth to Burn

months now. I'd been to the beach, touched dinosaur bones in a museum, been to dinner with several other jumpsuits. He said that I was in the process of "getting a life."

I had even visited Allied Entertainment.

They had not recognized me at first, and even when they did, it still took them some time to believe that I was *really* there. But once over the shock of having finally met me, several of the staff had placed their organic hands in mine in a ritual shake and welcomed me, and I was given an office. Starting next month I would *physically* visit once a week. The physical visit was not a requirement of the job, they had explained to me, but a fringe benefit, since most employees found it *enjoyable* to physically interact with their co-workers on a regular basis. I would try.

I stood up.

"I'd forgotten just how beautiful these mountains could be," I said.

Barker materialized on a speckled granite boulder to my left. "So glad that you're enjoying yourself, but it's time to get down to business."

I had an instant adrenaline rush and could feel my eyes bulge from my head. I bit my lower lip, worked my boots into the gravelly soil, and scanned the clearing, trying to see whatever it was that was about to get me.

And something would be getting me.

"It's absolutely amazing," said Barker as he floated over toward me. "You obviously don't remember this place, despite the fact that what took place here is what was responsible for making you what you are."

I was sweating, breathing hard.

I stood in the clearing. It was empty, nothing here, just the remnants of what looked like a campfire and a few partially buried rusted-out metal sheets.

"Look hard!" shouted Barker.

The clearing suddenly filled, the rusted metal sheets and burnt logs gone. A white and gray trailer filled the clearing. My knees gave way and I fell. I back-pedaled in the gravel, trying to get away. "No!" I screamed.

On the trailer door hung a cross—a rusted chunk of ragged cut steel.

"No!"

The door opened, and they shuffled out.

I sat in the dirt, unmoving, too scared to move. I held my breath. There was Aunt Ruth in her gray dress, dragging behind her Amy and Jared, both of them barefoot, dirty, their faces tear-streaked. The rest emptied from the trailer. They squinted in the bright sunlight. Haggard, frightened, standing together like sheep, they waited.

"The time has come!"

Uncle Owen came leaping out of the trailer, taking the steps two at a time. His face was red, and the corners of his mouth actually frothed. He waved his Bible around his head. "It is time. The hour is upon us and Satan is nearing. Our salvation is at hand!"

"Amen!" screamed the congregation.

"Satan shall not have our souls," he screamed.

"Amen!" replied his congregation.

He then vanished back into the trailer for just a moment, and when he came back out, he was carrying a large red can. I knew it, recognized it, could smell its contents before he even opened it. "We will be cleansed!" he screamed as he poured the gasoline out, splashing it against the side of the trailer. "We will be delivered."

"Amen!" they screamed.

"And we will use Satan's own tool to deliver us!"

"Amen!" they answered, and then turned as one to stare at me. The hate in their eyes, in their faces, was so intense, so frightening, that I stopped breathing, squeezed my eyes shut, and started to scream.

"Stand up!"

My body obeyed. I stopped screaming, opened my eyes and stood. Uncle Owen stood in front of me, his bloated face only inches from mine. He reeked of alcohol, and his eyes were opened impossibly large, bloodshot, the pupils little black holes.

"Take it!"

I felt my right hand uncurl, the dirt and gravel that had been in my fist falling to the ground. He pushed something hard and greasy into the palm of my hand—the *lighter*.

"Listen to me, you sniveling little coward." His right hand wrapped around my face, squeezing, the big fingers trying to crack bones. "All these good people are going to meet their Maker," he said. I looked past his shoulder. They were filing into the trailer. "But not you. God does not want you, does not want someone as filthy as you, someone who has been violated in the most obscene and disgusting fashion."

He dropped his hand from my face, raised it high in the air, and then brought it back down, catching me in the side of the face, snapping my head back, spinning me around, dropping me to the ground.

My vision blurred, the pain almost unbearable. My jaw was broken.

"You made me do those things to you!" he roared. "You made me unclean. All of this is your fault!" He brought the full force of a black boot down on my right foot. The sound of snapping bones echoed throughout the meadow. "And now you will pay for your sins. The loyal, the clean, the untouched will go to our Lord. But you will be left behind. We will use the evil in you to deliver all of us!"

He ran to the trailer, up the steps and into the doorway. He turned.

"Burn us!" he screamed.

I stood and hobbled forward, the lighter in my hand. I flicked it on, the blue-yellow flame burning bright.

"Do it!" he screamed. "You are evil, unclean! Murder us all! Deliver us to the Lord!"

I held the lighter high above my head.

I hated him, hated them all. They *all* deserved to die. They had all known what Uncle Owen had been doing to me, but had done nothing to stop it. They deserved to die. I would kill them all. And then it would be over.

I would *finally* be safe.

"Burn us!" he screamed again. "Deliver us!"



Absolute Magnitude

That was exactly what I *would* do. It was what I *had* done.
"Now!"

I would throw the lighter, hurl it at the trailer, and burn them all to cinders, sending them straight to Hell.

"You are evil! Finish your evil work! End it now!" he screamed.

My hand jerked forward. My fingers began to let go of the lighter. They would burn and I would be set free. It would *finally* be over.

My arm stopped moving. My fingers wrapped back around the lighter.

It would finally be over?

I shook my head. They would burn. They would die. And I would be left. I would be evil. I would be the murderer. I would be the one who would live in hospital after hospital, finally ending up in Hospice #7856. Killing him would not end it, had not ended it.

I dropped the lighter.

"Please!" wailed Uncle Owen, who fell to his knees, pushed his hands together and shook them at me. "I beg you to put an end to this!"

I turned and stumbled away, dragging my broken foot behind me.

"End this!" he screamed.

I had ended it.

June 12

"This is it," said Barker from within his carrying case. Door R-5674.

I knocked and waited. I could hear movement within, what sounded like the rattling of chains and some thumps at the door. The knob turned, and the door opened a crack. I waited. Nothing more happened.

"Open it," said Barker.

I slowly pushed the door open, peered in, and saw something moving in the far shadows, something with a vaguely human shape that scuttled across the floor and was dragging what might have been a blanket.

"Don't disturb her," said Barker. "Just take me into the kitchen and get me installed."

The layout of the apartment was identical to mine. I rounded the corner and ignored the animal-like sounds that were coming from the living room. There was not much to getting Barker hooked up in the kitchen. I placed the case gently on the countertop, right between sink and toaster, plugged in the System link and then the input and output goo lines.

The case opened.

I did not know what to say. I did not know how to thank him. Barker had saved my life. And as certain as I was of that, I was also certain that he had saved the lives of the 22 he had lived with before he had come to my apartment. I wanted to tell him of my plans, how when I wasn't at Allied, I would be working here, helping those who could be helped, giving aid to those that he and the other heads managed to get out of their apartments.

I could never pay him back.

I didn't know what I could do for him.

"Be sure to close the door on your way out," said Barker.

I shook my head. "That's it," I said. "After a year together, that is all you have to say?" I couldn't believe it. He had saved my life. "What can I do for you?"

Barker's chin quivered in a laugh. "I thought you had it all figured out, Tommy, but I guess not. You've been delivered from your self-imposed Hell, and now I believe that you're having the guilts over what to do about the pathetic ol' head that helped deliver you."

I couldn't reply.

"Nothing to worry about," said Barker. The top of his skull shimmered, and the skin and bone pulled back, revealing a dense, dark tangle of wires, boards and twinkling lights. "I'm just a chunk of System hardware. I'm not alive and never have been."

I stepped back.

Impossible.

"There are no heads, no frozen brains to be revived. Dead is dead. It has been found to be of significant therapeutic value when the patient believes that the head is an organic entity, someone trapped just like themselves—a victim removed not only from society, but from their very body."

"No," I whispered.

"So there's no need to worry about me, Tommy. I'm just an inorganic. No feelings, no remorse, no past, and no future. Have a good life." The top of the skull resealed itself.

"Good-bye," I whispered. I turned and walked out of the apartment, closing the door firmly behind myself.

It was over.

A tear ran down my right cheek, but I still managed a smile.

Barker was not as smart as he thought he was. I'd created Lauren, understood the artificial and the real. I'd come to recognize just how much bandwidth reality has to offer, and just how little the synthetic world really possesses. I knew what Barker had shown me within his skull was not real, but just one final vision sent by way of my neuromorphic chips. He wanted me to start clean, start new, to put the past away and build a new life. And he was part of that past.

I'd respect his wishes.

That's what friends did.

"Thank you," I whispered as I walked down the long empty hallway.





LOE1 DEITRICK...2000



Carving

by J. F. Peterson

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"Do you ever miss him?"

James looked up at his mother's words. She stared out the viewport, out across the *Prairie Seed's* hull, toward Summer. Her eyes, deep green like oak leaves, reflected in the glass. Stars slid by outside with the rotation of the ship's habitation ring.

"Sometimes," he said, but it was hard to remember Dad anymore. It had been four years since the accident, and he barely remembered it. He had only been three. He had dreams, but most often he forgot what Dad looked like and had to check the photos in Mom's cabin to remember. He felt bad when that happened, as if he had done something wrong, and his eyes hurt like they were swelling in their sockets. Sometimes he thought they would explode, but then they leaked tears, or he would press them back in until the pain went away.

He hugged his teddy bear, Sprocket, close. Mom had given him Sprocket when Dad died. Dad had worked with sprockets, gaskets, and all sorts of electronic things that James had learned everything about since. Dad would have liked Sprocket.

Mom turned to him, ran a hand through his hair. "You look like him, you know. Did I ever tell you that?" She had. She glanced back to the viewport, took a deep breath. "Come on, I want to finish my carving before we make our approach." She checked her watch. "We've got a couple of hours before we have to start monitoring."

The two of them left for the workshop.

Mom carved everything. Over the years, she had touched every wall, every support, in the ship — everything but James's room. Bas-reliefs covered walls with people, scenes, places. A rabbit was frozen in midjump in the hallway across from the observation bay. A cityscape from Tempest, the planet where James had been born, stretched down the hall. You could see the people walking along the skyways that climbed the sides of a mountain, tiny figures, some smiling, some laughing, some just walking. It was almost like being there. The ceiling and floors were covered with carved flowers and vines. Engravings of James and Mom occurred occasionally, but not Dad. Mom didn't carve Dad.

The engraving above the workshop door read, "A neat workplace is the sign of a sick mind." Mom took a seat at her workbench, pushing aside multicolored wires and solution bottles. There was a plastic block on the bench, big, nearly a meter square, with grooves and holes set into one edge, as if it had been part of some larger device. She laid it across her thighs, wrist against the faded olive of her coverall, and pulled out her utility knife.

The blade cut the plastic easily. She peeled off slivers, cracked off chunks. Chips scattered across the floor, falling slowly, curving slightly as they dropped: Coriolis effect from the ship's rotation. In Earthsim, things fell straight, and always at the same rate. In Earthsim, no one carved.

James sat in the middle of a sundial carved into one of the floor panels, a smiling sun etched into the ceiling above, Sprocket nestled beside him. Mom had told him that she liked to keep him nearby, where she could "keep an eye on him." The sundial was the place she liked him to stay. James understood how she felt; he felt the same way about Sprocket.

He was thinking about going to Summer, about being the first human on the planet. Mom told him that wasn't a big deal anymore,

that it was all "pretty routine nowadays." But it was a big deal to him. He wiggled his loose tooth with his tongue and tried to keep still; Mom was carving.

He tried to pick out shapes as she worked, to figure out what she was making. It always bothered him when she finished, when there was nothing left to guess at, nothing left to play with. It gave him an uncomfortable feeling, like the inside of his skull was itchy. The shapes in the discarded scraps just weren't the same.

He thought this one was a planet. It would be cold, unlike Summer, where they were going, and with everything in white. Summer was a goldish-red apple, colored with white swirls. Mom told him that Summer was hot, with thick air like the steam off of hot soup. The planet Mom was making looked exactly the opposite, cold and harsh.

A pop, and a chunk cracked back.

It was a mushroom, now. A big fat stool with dirt all over the stalk. James had studied them in Earthsim. Mom made him spend four hours in Earthsim every day, and James had a little garden where he grew all sorts of things, but he especially liked mushrooms. They were the "pioneers of the soil" Mom told him. They made the dirt all right for everything else to live, like settlers. But the settlers came later. Two years later. At first, it would just be him and Mom, mushrooms, and all the ecomachines, making a brand new version of Earth, just like people did on every planet they moved to. Mom told him that there were hundreds of planets waiting for people like her, to make them all right places to live. That was her job. After Summer, there would be somewhere else.

James used to think Mom was a "planetologist", someone who made sure everyone had enough of everything. He'd told all the kids in Earthsim that. Mom corrected him. She was a "planetologist."

She said she needed him to do the job; that's what all the training was for. Without him, all the people would arrive in the colony ship and not have a home, and Mom would lose her contract. Then the government would take him away and he would be all alone. He was glad she let him help.

Bits of the mushroom cracked and fell to the floor, settling in piles.

And it was a boy, standing. The eyes looked over James' shoulder, no matter how he turned his head and squinted at them. They looked empty. James decided the boy must be looking for his teddy bear. It had fallen out an airlock when its security tether broke. The bear had been trying to repair something on the ship, but James couldn't quite remember what. Some gizmo. It had been a "damnable accident." At least, that's what Mom would call it. And then she would cry and cry and lock herself in her cabin.

James decided he would share his teddy bear with the carving. It was the right thing to do.

His eyes were swelling. He made two tight fists and tried to press them back into the sockets.

"James?"

He dropped his fists and looked up. Mom was holding the carving out to show. It was him, James, all in white. The carving was holding hands with someone, but the hand it held disappeared just above the wrist. James blinked, stood up and walked over, reaching out to touch it. His feet kicked up bits and scraps of plastic on the floor that stuck to

Absolute Magnitude



his jumpsuit. "It's me."

Mom tussled his hair. "Yes, it is. I got the plastic from your father's statchamber." She checked her watch. "Come on, we're closing on the final approach." She took his hand and they made their way to the *Prairie Seed's* bridge, through corridors of bas-reliefs into the ship's core section, where the habitation ring could be seen through the observation ports: a long white tube, slowly spinning. Behind, the bulk of the *Prairie Seed* blocked out the

stars with compartments of eomachines, atmosphere factories, the reentry vehicle they would take down to the surface.

James liked the bridge. Control panels lit the place in a dim green and red glow, like the cities in Earthsim. New York. That's where Dad was from, before he moved to Tempest and met Mom, and this was Dad's place. He used to sit in the wide chair, the one with the thick VR jack and the soft plastic gel pads, before they all went into deepsleep. James's chair now.

James nestled Sprocket beside him and strapped in just as the first proximity klaxons started blaring. "Will it be like the sims, Mom?" He had asked her before, but he wanted to make sure. Mom had run through the protocols a hundred times, to make sure he knew everything, just in case something went wrong. He was mostly there for later, after Mom had dropped the preliminary payload. Whatever that was. He would help her install the atmosphere factories and monitor the eomachines.

It would be three tendays before they landed, before all the early preparations had been made and the *Prairie Seed* settled into a stable orbit. James wished they had landed already; atmospheres were bumpy and made his butt hurt.

Mom smiled, checking his straps, then seated herself in the command chair and pulled her restraining harness into place. "Just like the sims. Now jack in while I run the final systems checks."

James did as he was told and plugged the jack in at his wrist. He saw through the *Prairie Seed's* sensors. Summer filled his eyes, range and distance crosshairs following wherever he looked. Data on atmosphere composition and temperature flashed to one side. He hardly noticed it. He was watching the violet and red mountains, the green-orange of shallow seas twisted between masses of land. Everything glinted like glass in the bright gold of the sun, flecks of reflected brilliance making the oceans shimmer as if they were filled with jewels. It was beautiful.

"Damn."

Mom never swore. James almost unjacked to see what was wrong. The *Prairie Seed* bumped against the atmosphere, and he squirmed in his seat. He could see the air flashing below, like wave crests, and below that the candy-colored world, bright purples, reds, pinks all swirled together. He thought "Candy" was a better name than "Summer."

"Target beacon is not responding. The easel is dirty. James, I'm going to need you to acquire a new target. Do you remember how to do that?" Mom sounded worried. Acquiring a target site for the colony was important.

"I remember." He blinked his eyes three times quickly, activating

new detectors. The planet lit up in shades of yellow, blue, white: computer projections of ultraviolet, infrared, microwave light. Summer was even prettier than it had been in the sims. Even more like candy.

"Tell me," Mom said.

A desert slid by, golden-yellow with scattered flecks of red where life held on, like flowers. "I'm supposed to find an island where people can live and lock the EMs on it."

"That's right. And how do you recognize the right place?"

"A tiger almost always bounces."

The ship shivered, a deep thrum running through it, as if the metal were moaning. "Computer, engage aerobraking sequence, nominal stroke. James, tell me what that stands for."

"Area, temperature, atmosphere, altitude, barometric pressure." The computer would help him measure area and altitude; he could figure out the rest himself.

Still, he worried. He had done all this in Earthsim, but this was different. This was real. What if he couldn't find the right place? What if there wasn't a right place anymore? It had been thirty years since the preliminary probes had reached Summer, maybe all the islands were gone. Thirty years. He hadn't even been born then. "That's right. You'll do fine." He heard the smile in her voice. It made him feel warm inside, a little less worried.

Ice fringed the top of the planet, a tiny blue and white cap. Below it passed a stretch of rippling pink, a great plain covered with life. Then ocean, orange and green deepening to blue in a few places. No place he could use.

"I can't find anything, Mom."

She was fighting with the controls. He heard her muttering commands to the computer, felt the ship vibrating. "It'll be all right, James. Just keep looking." She was worried, too.

A chain of islands edged into view.

He squinted and the sensors compensated, zooming in. The islands were blue, purple, strands of pink running down the sides of old cinder cones like veins. All wrong; none of them fit. Faster, he had to look faster.

He thought of Mom losing her job, being taken away. His eyes flicked so fast he almost missed it.

They skimmed back and he saw it. A tall mountain stabbed up toward him, the cone of what must once have been a volcano. A riot of reds and yellows, blues and purples, covered everything, as if someone had taken his crayons and scribbled all over the island. The right colors. The right altitudes, area, atmosphere. "I found one, Mom."

He waited for her to get a chance to look at the island; she was still busy piloting. He squinted again, zooming in even closer. The *Prairie Seed* must have been pulling close to the atmosphere; he hadn't been this close to a planet since he was a baby, and he could see everything. There were things like the trees in Earthsim, only purple and twisting as if they were spun sugar, boughs woven together like cloth. And there were blue-red vines that hung like Christmas decorations from the branches, and purple fluttering things that looked like sheets, and brown things that just crawled slowly along as if nothing else mattered. The things slipped past, hard to focus on with the ship moving, with clouds occasionally muddying the view.

The ship vibrated like it was going



Carving

to fall apart. He didn't know if he could hear Mom if he wanted to.

Something danced between trees, red and yellow. It had thin spindly legs and a thick coat of maroon fur. He pretended it was Sprocket, his teddy bear, and thought that maybe, if he caught it, he would get to keep it for a pet, and give it to the carving. Then the carving-boy wouldn't have to be alone.

The creature didn't really have a tail, or a face, but it had big yellow eyes that looked like nutrient pellets. They were funny. Two, three others danced out of the trees, playing.

James smiled. "Mom," he said, wondering if she could see them. "Mom." He had to speak up over the noise the ship was making.

"The island looks fine," she said, loud enough for him to hear. "Commencing first approach. Paint primary site."

He remembered his job, that he had to make sure he was focused on the center of the island. He heard Mom muttering commands to the computer. The ship jumped a bit, brushing atmosphere. There was a moment of bucking, a rushing sound like air between teeth, then a loud thump. The *Prairie Seed* jerked away from the planet and James thought he had lost the island. He zoomed out, found it again, then squinted to focus back in on it.

He saw a group of aliens, like the one he had decided to give to the carving-boy. One of them looked up, then all the others. As if they could see him. They stopped moving. Their funny yellow eyes followed him across the sky. There was a faint yellow-orange glow cast across Summer. It looked like fire.

"Preliminary payload deployed," Mom said. "Trajectory verified. Reclaiming altitude." James's view pulled away from the island. The aliens receded until they were the size of insects, surrounded by a quilt

of blue and red plants.

The yellow glare brightened.

Then a flash of white flared and died. The aliens curled into little balls. One of them unrolled slightly, poking its yellow nutrient pill eyes out. James could barely see them as it started to stand.

Fire rolled over the creature, a wave of red-yellow heat that washed across everything James could see. The sugar-trees shriveled. The vines shattered into a thousand crystal fragments. The fields of pink blackened. Everything burned.

James scrambled for his jack, pulled it out. His eyes were closed and he couldn't breath. His heart pounded, pounded. He grabbed Sprocket and hugged him tight.

His eyes swelled, hurt. He thought they were filled with fire. In his mind, he saw the alien uncurl again, stand, fire wash over it. Its yellow eyes popped in the flames.

He felt Mom's hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and she was there in front of him, looking at him with her worried expression. Her green eyes were like none of the colors of Summer.

"Why?" he said.

She pulled back a bit, then leaned forward and took his hand between hers. "When you carve," she said, "you take things away."



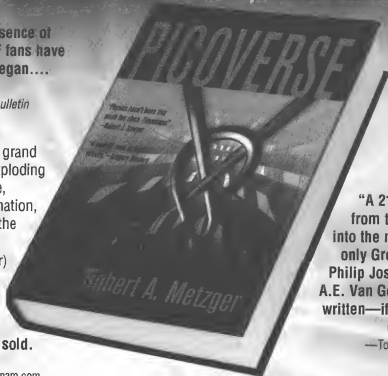
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Primary Ignition

The End of the Century

by Allen M. Steele



The week before Black Tuesday, my wife and I were on our way home from the World Science Fiction Convention. We had taken Amtrak to Philadelphia; late in the afternoon of Labor Day, we climbed back aboard for the long ride back to western Massachusetts. It had been a long weekend: a half-dozen panels, two book signings, meetings with various editors, and more parties in five days than I had been to eight months. I was exhausted, and all I wanted to do was go home.

For awhile I skimmed an old issue of *Science Fiction Review* I had found in the dealers room, but as the train rumbled through New Jersey I glanced up in time to see the lights of New York. Dusk had settled upon the city, and now Manhattan looked like a vast jewelbox. The World Trade Center dominated the skyline: two mammoth pillars rising above the horizon, dwarfing everything else in sight. Strictly in terms of aesthetics, I'd never cared much for the twin towers—compared to the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, they always seemed rather utilitarian—yet after dark they gained a certain majesty they lacked in daytime. At night, those sleek glass monoliths become enormous shafts of lights; when the clouds were low, they seemed to hold up the sky itself. And there was always a certain sense of permanence about them; that particular evening, I distinctly remember thinking: *These things are the modern pyramids. They're going to be around long after I'm gone, and future generations will be marveling at the civilization that created them.*

Eight days later, I was proven wrong.

Until the morning of Tuesday, September 11, I had privately considered 2001 to be "the Year of Science Fiction." Indeed, that was going to be the original title of this month's column, for it seemed as if the eight previous months had been culturally dominated by SF. Everywhere one looked, science fiction dominated the cultural landscape, with SF writers becoming the new intelligentsia: Sir Arthur C. Clarke presented the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay from his home in Sri Lanka and was the subject of countless

newspaper interviews; Bruce Sterling guest-edited an issue of *Whole Earth Review* and also a special edition of *Newsweek*; Spider Robinson was a celebrity judge for . . . um, shall we say, a gardening exposition . . . held in Amsterdam; Doug Beason was interviewed for an article on space weapons in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*; I myself testified before the House Subcommittee on Science and Space. Novels by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, Orson Scott Card, and Anne McCaffery appeared on the bestseller lists, and the biggest movies of the summer were *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* and the remake of *Planet of the Apes*. There was even the cover story of a sleazy men's magazine, "The Girls of Sci-Fi," featuring various B-list actresses in various states of undress.

Beyond that, though, it seemed as if this was the year the future had arrived. The International Space Station was in orbit and nearly half-complete, the human genome had been mapped, and the Internet had become an intrinsic part of the global culture. Astronomers had discovered planets in orbit around distant stars, and the prospect of human cloning was a major topic of public debate. With the exception of small brush wars here and there—and it was all too easy to ignore the civil war in Afghanistan—the world was finally at peace. Perhaps we didn't have Pan Am space clippers, yet nonetheless it appeared that 2001 was, indeed, the first year of the 21st century.

On the other side of the world, though, there were men who didn't see things the same way. Huddled in the tents of terrorist training camps north of the Kyber Pass, they looked upon America and saw a decadent nation, oppressive of Islamic countries, blasphemous in the sight of God. Like the Martians of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, they regarded us with unsympathetic eyes as they slowly drew their plans against us, and on a clear autumn day they struck without mercy or warning.

Now the future no longer seems quite so benign. And yet, despite all this, I can't help but consider the notion that this may not be the beginning of the future, but rather the end of the past. That is to say, the events of Black Tuesday may not mark the beginning of the new millennium so much as the closing act of the 20th century.

History is determined not by the turning pages of a calendar, but by events. It could be argued, for instance, that the 19th century began in 1803, when the United States government purchased from France 828,000 square miles of land stretching from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains; this marked the beginning of a steady westward expansion that would eventually contribute to the Industrial Revolution and, in the long run, transform America into a global power. And while some historians believe that the 20th century began in 1903 with the Wright Brothers' first airplane flight, others have stated that the 19th century effectively ended in 1912 with the sinking of the *Titanic*, a catastrophe which marked the limits of technological progress and brought about an end to Victorian complacency.

Without a doubt, the destruction of the World Trade Center will be regarded as the single most important event of 2001, and there are already signs that this single event will shape the course of human affairs for years to come. Discredited forever is the isolationist view of conservatives that the United States can remain detached from the rest of the world. In this age of global air travel, the oceans no longer pose a natural barrier against attack from abroad.

Primary Ignition

Some believe that this spells the end of America as a free society. As I write, Congress is poised to enact anti-terrorism legislation that will enable law enforcement agencies to more easily conduct electronic surveillance upon American citizens, and there is already talk of creating national I.D. cards and placing TV cameras in every public place. Yet none of these things can protect us. If phones and computers are bugged, then criminals will learn to operate without them, and it's not hard to foresee a black market in stolen or forged I.D. cards. In a response to IRA bombings, England has transformed itself into a surveillance society, with millions of cameras put in place over the last decade, yet despite the fact that, according to one estimate, the average British citizen is captured on camera nearly three hundred times a day, there has been no corresponding drop in terrorist attacks, let alone common street crime. And even if electronic surveillance and biometric face-recognition technology becomes widespread in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, or Dallas, it's difficult to envision TV cameras in small towns like Hatfield, McMinnville, Trinidad, or Columbia.

No. If we're serious about conducting a war against terrorism, and winning it, then we're going to have to attack it at its source . . . and not just with cruise missiles, B-2 bombers, and special-ops forces.

What Black Tuesday demonstrated is that our activity in the Middle East can have dire consequences here at home. Al Qaeda didn't come from nowhere, and Osama bin Laden wasn't a born terrorist; they were created by the world in which they live, which is very different from our own. It's hard for many Americans to realize that the grudge these people have against the United States was developed from many years of living under authoritarian rule in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, governments supported by the United States largely for the sake of maintaining oil pipelines to the West. The open political discourse that we often take for granted here is forbidden over there; dissidents have been jailed or exiled for criticizing their governments.

This has led countless young people in those countries, in anger and frustration, to fall under the sway of zealots and religious fanatics who blame America for everything from poverty and to bad music on the radio. By most accounts, Osama bin Laden himself was a rich kid who became radicalized while he was an engineering student in Cairo;

although he funneled money to Afghanistan's mujahidin during its war with the Soviet Union, he was never a freedom fighter himself, and indeed was considered a minor figure among the fundamentalist Muslim movement until he broke with his family and started Al Qaeda. The pattern was followed by the terrorists who hijacked the planes on Black Tuesday; most came from middle-class families in Saudi Arabia and Egypt who had come to see the United States as the source of all evil in the Middle East.

Make no mistake: I have no sympathy for Al Qaeda. I'd love nothing more than to learn that bin Laden and his lieutenants have been shot dead, or at least taken prisoner to await trial before the World Court in the Hague. But terrorism is much like the mythical hydra; cut off one head, and a dozen more take its place. On way or another, the men responsible for Black Tuesday will eventually be held accountable for their actions, yet if we don't want others like them to avenge them as martyrs, then we have to address the reasons why nineteen men would hijack four commercial airliners, kill their pilots, and deliberately drive the aircraft into two skyscrapers and the Pentagon, with the fourth plane averted from its target—possibly the White House or the Capitol—only because a handful of brave passengers got in their way.

There has to be some way out of our present mess. And knowing that is what gives me hope for the future.

Only the most callous cynic would have unmoved by the sense of solidarity that seized the country in the wake of the September attacks. If the intent of Al Qaeda was to paralyze America—and that must have been the objective; why else strike in such a dramatic fashion?—then their scheme failed, and even backfired. Literally overnight, all the old arguments and feuds were put aside; candlelight vigils were held in virtually every city, every town, while hundreds of thousands of people lined up to donate blood to the Red Cross. Flags came out of attics where they were usually kept for the Fourth of July and were hung from homes, stores, gas stations, public office buildings, lamp posts, car antennas, anything that could support their weight. For four days, the skies above America were silent while all commercial air traffic was grounded for the first time in history, and yet no one protested even though the travel plans of countless business commuters and vacationers were

affected. It soon became apparent that bin Laden and his minions had miscalculated; instead of bringing down the United States, they brought it together. Like the Japanese in 1941 and the British in 1812, they had picked a fight with the wrong people.

As I write, Afghanistan is undergoing its second consecutive week of aerial bombing, and it's only a matter of time before American ground forces move into that country. How long this conflict will last, no one can say; by the time you read this, we'll probably have seen TV pictures of U.S. troops moving through the mountains, searching for Al Qaeda hideouts within underground tunnels originally dug by farmers in search of water to irrigate their crops. Meanwhile, here at home, the FBI has been conducting raids upon those suspected of being in league with Al Qaeda; several terrorist cells have been claimed to have been broken up, yet only time will tell whether the feds have found everyone. Before the year is over, there may be another major terrorist attack within the United States; on the other hand, it may be several years before they strike again, when we've relaxed our guard, as we inevitably will.

Some call this the first war of the 21st century. However, I suspect—or at least hope—that this will instead be the last conflict of the 20th century, one that has simply arrived a couple of years late. Indeed, it's not so much a war as it is a military police action. By definition, wars are fought between nations; although Afghanistan's Taliban regime shielded and supported the Al Qaeda, the people of Afghanistan aren't the culprits. The Taliban took control of their country by force, and most of the world refused to acknowledge its claim to government long before Black Tuesday. So despite the use of high-tech weapons and armed soldiers, this is much more a matter of rounding up indicted criminals than it is waging a declared war against another country.

When the United States entered World War I following the sinking of the *Housatonic*, President Woodrow Wilson called it "the war to end all wars." He was proven wrong, for World War I was the prelude not only to World War II, but also for all the conflicts to follow during the 20th century. Yet this time, Wilson's proclamation may be fulfilled; the fight against terrorism may indeed become the war to end all wars.

For most of our lives, my generation has
Continued on page 31

The Best is Yet to Come

by Marvin Kaye

Some comic once quipped that the best thing at the movies isn't the feature you paid to see, but the Coming Attractions. That's a consideration in itself because if you measure today's noisy trailers against vintage examples, and if you prefer incisive dialogue to explosive visuals, you'd run to the video store more often than to the local multiplex. Still, there's some truth to the old gag. One film I viewed recently sure looked better in the Coming Attractions . . .

Friends already were grumbling about M. Night Shyamalan's new fantasy, *Unbreakable*. They warned me it was "nowhere near as good as *The Sixth Sense*." An unfair test, I thought; history abounds with decent follow-ups trashed by the harsh critical establishment. After all, I reasoned, *The Sixth Sense* would be a hard act for anyone to follow. What if writer-director Shyamalan had made *Unbreakable* first? Wouldn't it have been regarded as an auspicious debut? If so, then it deserved to be judged on its own merits.

Unfortunately, that's where *Unbreakable* breaks down. *Wasted*: a superb cast headed by Bruce Willis playing (what else?) a deeply troubled man. *Irrelevant*: haunting, splendidly composed visuals. *Pointless*: a deliberately agonizing pace that works up considerable suspense at the climax.

How can so much good work count for nothing? Because on a scale of one to ten for Dumbass Movie Plots, *Unbreakable* earns 9.5. For quite a while, the premise had me riveted: how can one man walk away without a scratch from a train wreck that killed all the other passengers? (No, sorry, I'm not going to say what it is. Rent the videotape; it'll be a lot cheaper than what it cost me first-run.) But when the film's *raisonneur*, Samuel L. Jackson, attempts to justify the "big secret" with cultural argumentation, what went through my mind at the denouement was, "Oh, come ON . . .!"

My friends were right. *The Sixth Sense* is better because of its mature premise. *Unbreakable*, for all its creator's remarkable cinematic technique, is a disappointingly adolescent film.

I had a very different experience at a screening of *Shadow of the Vampire*, the revisionist tale from Saturn Films/Lion's Gate of the filming of the early F. W.



Murnau vampire film, *Nosferatu* (1922). Unlike my high expectations for *Unbreakable*, I wasn't expecting much. *Shadow of the Vampire* would have us believe that Murnau hired Max Schreck, a genuine vampire with whom he'd made a nasty deal, which the critter repeatedly and bloodily reneged upon. What's the point, I thought, of fictionalizing (trivializing) the behind-the-scenes story of a great movie? But to my surprise, there is a point, and a good one, for the filmmaker in his relentless drive to create a horror masterpiece ultimately is a greater vampire than Schreck. The story unfolds with considerable verve and includes moments of pure comedy as well as gruesomeness. John Malkovich does a fine job as Murnau, but ultimately it is Willem Dafoe's Max Schreck that makes *Shadow of the Vampire* memorable. It is a performance that earned him an Oscar nomination. He didn't win the Oscar probably due to prejudice against horror films on the part of the Academy, the same attitude that film critic Andrew Sarris contends lost an Oscar nomination for Jeremy Irons for his brilliant portrayal of disturbed identical-twin doctors in David Cronenberg's troubling film, *Dead Ringers* (1988).

Let me modify two things I said in my last column:

First, I thought that *Shadow* would totally ignore the fact that *Nosferatu* is a rip-off of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but I was partly wrong. The film does mention Murnau's inability to obtain permission to film the Stoker novel, but that's where it stops. In actuality, Stoker's widow won her legal suit, *Nosferatu* was declared plagiaristic, and prints of it were supposed to be destroyed. The fact that it survives makes me a trifle uncomfortable. It is a masterpiece that deserves preservation, and yet all authors protest the cavalier attitude toward writers that, according to *Shadow of the Vampire*, goes all the way back to silent cinema: when Max Schreck feeds on an important member of Murnau's production staff, the irate director asks why he couldn't have attacked the writer instead!

Second, I suggested last issue that Max Schreck was a made-up name adopted by the actor who played the vampire in *Nosferatu*. I had read that in a film text at one time, but it is inaccurate. Though research—thanks to several colleagues, especially Keith Kahla and Kim Newman—turned up some fascinating theories about Herr Shreck (whose last name is generally translated as "terror"), including one in which Murnau himself allegedly played the vampire, Max Schreck does appear to be the real name of an actor born in Berlin in 1879. A member at one time of a well-known troupe of actors directed by Max Reinhart, Schreck both appeared on stage and acted in approximately thirty German films from 1920 to 1932. He died in Munich in 1936.

And back to being disappointed: Disney's *Fantasia 2000* is a mishmash. The flying whales are vapid, and the Firebird at the climax is just plain anticlimactic. Even the Donald Duck sequence is not what it's quacked up to be. The flamingoes with yo-yos are adequate, but no match for the 1940 film's "Dance of the Hours." The opening sampler from the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is OK, though it doesn't measure up to the old movie's Bach D Minor Toccata and Fugue; for one thing, they trimmed the already brief movement too much. The best sequences are Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," set to part of Shostakovich's 2nd Piano Concerto, and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in

Absolute Magnitude

Blue," an animated New York story based on Al Hirschfeld's wonderful cartoons—the latter is by far the best thing in *Fantasia 2000*. There's also a reprise of the 1940 "Sorcerer's Apprentice" sequence starring Mickey Mouse, but it just points up how much better the old movie is.

The Coming Attractions gag inevitably comes to mind upon considering the science fiction films coming in the next several months. Some look promising, some do not, but none capture my imagination as much as other movies in varying stages of development (or stasis): Pierce Brosnan in Ray Bradbury's classic story, *A Sound of Thunder*; Isaac Asimov's first robot detective novel, *The Caves of Steel*; Orson Scott Card's Hugo-winning *Ender's Game*; a remake of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (Remake? there's more Truffaut than Bradbury in the 1966 film); and a new version of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* that might costar Guy Pearce and Jeremy Irons.

Warner Brothers has set June 29th as the release date for the new Steven Spielberg production (he wrote it and is directing it) of *A.I.*, which stands for artificial intelligence. Partly based on a Brian Aldiss short story, "Supertoy's Last All Day Long," *A.I.* stars the lad from *The Sixth Sense*, Haley Joel Osment, as a new form of computer designed to help mankind manage the ecological disaster caused by the Greenhouse Effect. (Presumably this will have no effect on political conservatives, who already regard environmental issues as so much science fiction.)

Atlantis: The Lost Empire, to be released this summer by Walt Disney, is an animated adventure beneath the seas with the voices of Michael J. Fox, Mark Hamill, James Garner, David Ogden Stiers, and possibly also Leonard Nimoy.

Also coming this summer from DreamWorks: a comedy-suspense disaster film, *Evolution*, starring David Duchovny and Julianne Moore. The plot revolves about a meteorite that crashes to earth, bringing with it a single-celled life-form with a nasty propensity for multiplying rapidly and becoming various flora and fauna, some of them dangerous to humanity.

Computer-generated visuals are promised in *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a film version of the video game being released in mid-July by Columbia Pictures and the Japanese company Gaijin-Humax. Set on earth in 2065, it features the voices of Alec

Baldwin, James Woods, Donald Sutherland, and Peri Gilpin.

August 24th is the announced release date for Sony Pictures's *Ghosts of Mars*, cowritten by Larry Sulkis and John Carpenter and directed by Carpenter. Natasha Henstridge, Ice Cube, Joanna Cassidy, and Pam Grier head a cast of humans who, nearly two hundred years from now, have colonized Mars, only to stir up Martian ghosts who decide to possess the colonists. Ghosts of Mars? Or Ghosts of Ray Bradbury?

Three more science fiction remakes are promised this summer:

- *Jurassic Park 3* from Universal Pictures. The ending of *JP2* made it inevitable, along with the humongous box office it earned, despite its many flaws. The new film boasts an impressive cast, at least: Téa Leoni, William H. Macy, Michael Jeter, and a recidivist from the first film, Sam Neill.

- *Planet of the Apes* stars Mark Wahlberg, Tim Roth, Helena Bonham Carter, Kris Kristofferson, possibly George Clooney, and none other than Charlton Heston himself (should "himself" have a capital H?) The director is Tim Burton, the special effects makeup has been designed by the estimable Rick Baker, and Danny Elfman composed the music. 20th Century Fox plans to release the new version in late July.

- *Rollerball*, with Chris Klein and LL Cool J, is being produced by Norman Jewison, who gave us the original 1975 version starring James Caan and John Housman. The horrific title game apparently greatly appealed to the athletes who "played" it in the old film, and that in itself is sufficiently horrible, I think.

Two intriguing films from Dimension Films have been completed, but not yet released. *Imposter*, starring Gary Sinise, Madeleine Stowe, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Tony Shalhoub, was originally part of the still-awaited trilogy, *Alien Love Triangle*, but has been turned into a feature-length film on its own. Sinise plays Space Olham, an important earthling who, while the planet is engaged in a war with space aliens, is suddenly suspected of being a double agent for the aliens.

For *The Cause*, another Dimension Films science fiction war story, reunites Dean Cain and Justin Whalin from TV's *Lois and Clark* Superman series. Shame they couldn't also get Teri Hatcher.

Jeff Goldblum stayed away from the third Jurassic Park adventure this time, but he's still working with animals in *Cats and Dogs*,

coming from Warner Brothers. He costars with Elizabeth Perkins and Alexander Pollock in a new entry in the age-old conflict between canines and felines. The Jim Henson Creature Shop is responsible for "Animatronic Effects," with voices for the various pets supplied by, among others, Alec Baldwin, Susan Sarandon, and Jon Lovitz.

Animated fantasy features about to be released:

- *Osmosis Jones*, a Warner Brothers comedy based on police metaphors: the title character is a white blood cell who doesn't like playing by department rules, especially when teamed up with a by-the-book partner, a cold tablet. *Osmosis* is voiced by Chris Rock, and other voices are supplied by David Hyde Pierce, Laurence Fishburne, Molly Shannon, and William Shatner, with the "live" host body they are in played by Bill Murray.

- *Shrek*—no, it's spelled differently!—coming from DreamWorks, is the tale of an ogre who wants to quit being a bad guy and become a brave knight instead. The cast, presumably voiceovers, includes Mike Myers, Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, John Lithgow, and Linda Hunt.

- Though *Donnie Darko* has been completed, no release date has been announced by Flower Films/Gaylord Films/Adam Fields Productions. It's the story of a teenager and a six-foot-tall rabbit who keeps getting him into trouble. Now isn't that an unusual premise? What? Who would remember a 1950 film called *Harvey*, even if Jimmy Stewart did win an Oscar for his performance as Elwood P. Dowd, a man whose relatives want to put him away because of his friendship with a... oh, wait, *Harvey* was six feet, three and a half inches tall. Never mind.

The best is yet to come? Well, maybe. The end of the year promises what may be this year's best fantasy film.

November 16th is the date Warner Brothers has tentatively set for the eagerly awaited *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*; if you haven't read the J. K. Rowling novel, you're missing a treat, and no, it's not just for kids! Harry came into this world with a powerful evil wizard as an enemy. Orphaned as an infant, he is placed in the home of his thoroughly unpleasant aunt and uncle, only to be magically rescued and sent to school to become a wizard like his late parents. And that's only the beginning! Once again, Jim Henson's Creature Shop is involved in the production, and the musical

Marvin Kaye

score is by who else? John Williams. A newcomer, Daniel Radcliffe, understandably was cast as Harry, but there are some veterans involved, too: Richard Harris, Alan Rickman, Maggie Smith, and John Cleese as Nearly Headless Nick.

December 19th is slated by New Line Cinema for the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*. Another case where I'd rather forget the earlier version, that strange Ralph Bakshi thing released in 1978 with villains far better drawn than the heroes and an abrupt non-ending. The New Line film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, is the first of three planned films. Ian McKellen will play Gandalf, Ian Holm is Bilbo, Elijah Wood plays his nephew Frodo, Cate Blanchett is Galadriel, and in a stroke of casting genius, Christopher Lee will appear as the evil Saruman.

Next time at the Video Store: Haunted house films ought to be in black and white, but the British *Haunted*, based on James Herbert's novel, uses color rather more imaginatively than most. This is a film I would have missed if it had not been for the local VCR rental shop. While not especially frightening, it does maintain a genuinely eerie sense of otherness, some of it unsettlingly erotic, and there's a chilly little cameo appearance by the late Sir John Gielgud.

If you have strong nerves, go out and rent the newly-released videotape version of Georges Franju's 1959 cult classic *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (Eyes Without a Face), which is based on a story by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, who also wrote the novels filmed, respectively, by Clouzot and Hitchcock as *Diabolique* and *Vertigo*. Ivan Butler, in his fine study, *The Horror Film*, accurately describes *Les Yeux Sans Visage* as a work of stark, haunting beauty, despite the fact that it contains some of the most horrifying scenes ever filmed, including the surgical removal of a woman's face.



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lived in fear of war. I was born in 1958, just in time for the Cuban Missile Crisis. Growing up in the '60s, I watched while the oldest boys in my neighborhood were drafted into the Army or sweated out

college deferrals; everyone I knew who went to Nam came home, and the draft ended about six months before I turned 18. My young adulthood has therefore been spent in peacetime; I was well into my 30's when the short-lived Gulf War broke out, and although I've have several friends (and quite a few readers) who've served in the military, none have been killed in the line of duty, and with any luck I won't hear about any of them dying during the current conflict.

The interesting thing about this war is that it isn't being waged with those whom we grew up thinking would be our enemies. The Russians aren't our foes in this—indeed, they're our allies—and neither are the Chinese; neither country has anything to gain from waging war with America, and much to lose. Iran doesn't like the Taliban any more than we do; in fact, the Taliban made the mistake of executing several Iranian clerics and their families who happened to be visiting Afghanistan just before the Black Tuesday attacks. Iraq is keeping its head low at least for now, disavowing any culpability. Pakistan's government is lending support to the United States despite widespread public unrest; many Palestinians are likewise infuriated with the presence of American troops in the Middle East, but Yassar Arafat has distanced himself from Osama bin Laden.

Twenty years ago, one of the world's greatest problems were the enormous nuclear arsenals being maintained by the rival superpowers. Today, Russia and the United States are trying to find ways to safely dispose of all those nukes they longer want or really need. China is a major trading partner; I know one businessman who flies to Hong Kong so often that he's considering moving there. Most of the Arab countries have come to realize, however grudgingly, that destroying Israel is not in their best interests; better to leave it alone than to engage in one more pointless fight over the West Bank. North Korea is seeking reunification with South Korea. India and Pakistan both developed nuclear weapons, then realized the futility of mutually-assured destruction and backed off, or at least for the time being.

So what enemies are left? Only two: ignorance and fanaticism. Those are the factors that give aid and comfort to terrorists.

Ignorance by the West that it can tramp freely through the Middle East in search of cheap oil, with little thought about the people who live there. We have to learn that this is a different culture, and that they're not impressed by old-style colonialism. As Rudyard Kipling wrote over a hundred and ten years ago: "And the end of the fight is a tombstone white with the name of the late deceased, and the epitaph drear: A Fool lies here who tried to hustle the East." The British learned this the hard way when it lost India. Now it's America's turn.

Likewise, there's the fanatical belief of those like Osama bin Laden that, by using noncombatants as a target of opportunity, God will approve of the bloodshed. Before now, it may have been easy to overlook bombs being planted within Israeli buses or machine-gunning tourists visiting Egyptian ruins, yet Al Qaeda went over the top when it sent thousands of innocents in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania to their deaths. Like the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Black Tuesday attacks raised the price of terrorism far beyond the level of acceptable risk, because it showed that anyone could be caught in the crossfire.

If and when—and I believe it's a more a matter of *when*—the current conflict ends with the destruction of Al Qaeda and its fellow travellers, then humankind may well have taken a major step forward. We've seen the end of the threat of global nuclear warfare; it's no longer acceptable for countries to stockpile nukes as a means of deterrence. Since the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no atomic weapons have ever been used in war; the cost is far too high. Now we're faced with an equally perilous threat . . . and I think we'll see through this as well.

In collective terms, the human race may be dumb, but it ain't stupid. It knows when to draw the line. And that's why the events of September 11, 2001, aren't necessarily the beginning of a bloody new era, but rather the last morbid convulsion of an old one.

Or at least so I hope.





How We Know What Happened

A Just so Story for Adults

by Uncle River

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Jimmy Holmes was just an all-American boy from Lambeth, Oklahoma, who liked to tinker. Herd built four cars and sold each for enough dough to build the next one better before he was old enough for a license. His daddy sold appliances for a living: refrigerators, washing machines.—Jimmy could repair any of them by the time he was twelve. He also created the first stereo in Natchez County powerful enough to shatter the neighbors' dentures.

That's how he happened to get himself hired on at the University down at Norman as a technician. Jimmy Holmes was fresh out of high school, the same age as the students. He even signed up for a class, seeing as a freebie came with the job, but he only went twice. Boring as hell, and there were lots better places on campus to watch girls.

Norman, Oklahoma was just an eyeblink from Route Sixty-Six (metamorphosing at the time into Interstate Forty). Most people never noticed the potential in Norman's location. One who did was a scrawny ex-preacher who taught Poli-Sci at the U. from 1963 to '65 when his contract wasn't renewed and he went on to become moderately well-known writing books about SDS and the Anti-War Movement more authentic than many that were far more accurate.

Prof Spooner was not denied tenure because of the twenty acres of marijuana he grew every year from 1958 to 1968 in the Arkansas River bottom not far from Muskogee, which he gave away by the gunny sack full. He was denied tenure because he brought so many subversives to campus: Allen Ginsburg, Alan Watts, Herbert Marcuse, Howard Zinn. The last straw was Joan Baez.

Jimmy Holmes ran the sound system for all of them. Did this affect his social consciousness? He started taking acid in 1964. (Norman, Oklahoma was handy in more ways than one to major cross country traffic.) He tried to put the make on Joan Baez (which she ignored). And he joined the army a week after the U.S. bombed Hanoi (a place whose existence he had never previously noticed) out of boredom.

Boredom volunteered for Vietnam in boot camp and was recommended for OCS. He knew he was stronger and smarter than most guys, and sexier too, even if Joan Baez didn't go for him. So he was not a bit surprised when he scored high on his tests and was assured he would soon be on his way to Officer's Candidate School. The only thing he worried about was that the war might end before he made it over there.

Only, things didn't quite work out that way. Jimmy's appointment to OCS just kept not happening. Something was funny. One day when he was on leave, Jimmy stopped in on Prof Spooner back at the U. The Prof had just learned his next year's contract wasn't happening. He was considering raising some hell.

He knew how too. Prof Spooner knew how to find out which members of the University administration were silent partners in corporations with big university supply contracts and which state legislators' kids got straight As without ever showing their faces in class. For himself, the Prof decided it would be healthier to record the revolution than to fight local politics. He did use his sources to check up on Jimmy Holmes.

It was June, 1965, ninety-seven degrees and ninety-seven percent humidity. The mimosa tree in the Prof's yard was a fragrant pink haze. Jimmy and the Prof had just smoked three joints of the Prof's mediocre pot on his sweaty, mimosa-perfumed front porch overlooking two solid miles of June-gold ripe wheat. Prof Spooner liked to build suspense. He knew perfectly well what Jimmy was there for but took two hours to get around to telling him he knew why Jimmy wasn't going to Officer's Candidate School.

"Your Grandpa Holmes was in the IWW," the Prof finally said.

"Come again?"

"He was a Wobbly. Subversive."

"So what?"

"Guess they figure it might be hereditary."

What Dot LSD, Joan Baez and Allen Ginsburg did not do, the U. S. Army accomplished in one stroke. From that day on, Jimmy Holmes had a political consciousness.

That was before Jimmy went to Vietnam.

Jimmy found Vietnam confusing. The only thing he really didn't like about the war was being wrong. Not that the other side was right. But the Vietnamese on both sides were fighting for their own homes and country, and it was a little hard to say what we were doing there—except making somebody rich.

Jimmy watched with amazement the day six tons of sugar was dumped in the ocean because it was too much bother to fill out the papers to transfer it someplace else.

Jimmy was shot in the leg once, which he didn't really mind as he got a medal, healed unokay, and had lots of fun with an Australian nurse named Gretchen at the hospital in Japan. Jimmy also maybe killed a man once in a fire fight—the man took a hit to the head and didn't get back up anyhow—which Jimmy found he didn't like at all, but it was war; what could you do? The excitement did a lot to make up for the craziness, and if the war was immoral, at least the dope was good. Jimmy decided that was by far the best way to come out ahead. He sold lots of pot, but he didn't come out ahead. He parted away all the money.

Since Jimmy really did sell pot, it was ironic that the time he got busted, the contraband was planted. Ironic, but not surprising: Jimmy figured out while he was in Nam that the Army was loaning guys just like him to the CIA to run heroin. He found that disgusting... and said so once too often.

"Dumb shit," said his sergeant when he picked Jimmy up on his release, "you're lucky they didn't just blow you away."

"How'd you get me sprung?" Jimmy asked.

"Evidence disappeared."

"Oh?"

"You should stay away from smack."

"You know I don't do smack, and don't sell none neither."

"All the more reason to keep away from it."

Jimmy could hardly argue with that.

Since his legal troubles had nothing to do with his real activities, Jimmy saw no reason to go out of the pot business. Nor did the law, military or otherwise, appear to notice, even when he

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brought more Vietnamese marijuana back Stateside than he did clothing.

Prof Spooner's second book credited Jimmy Holmes with "organizing" the Lambeth, Oklahoma chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against The War. "Organize" hardly evokes the reality.

Jimmy's stereo was still the best in three counties. He always laid out a new kilo of pot and a dozen fresh packs of Zig-Zags on the living room table when the old was gone. And he was both the best and the most generous mechanic in Natchez County. He was also Natchez County's most decorated Vietnam Vet.

Jimmy opposed the war. He was sure the U. S. Government was wrong to be there and was run by evil people. And he really didn't like shooting people. But he loved excitement. He managed to get more equipment and more men into, through and out of more fire fights while he was in Nam than he could count. Despite his many decorations for valor, Jimmy's Honorable Discharge was as a Private First Class. He had an almost miraculous capacity for disregarding orders without quite directly disobeying them.

When the song, "Okie From Muskogee" was hot, Jimmy helped celebrate with the proprietors of one of the four labs in Muskogee that were producing LSD at the time by setting a bowl on his table, next to the perpetual kilo of pot, containing several thousand tabs. When the FBI infiltrated the Lambeth chapter of the Vietnam Vets Against The War the agents couldn't help but to get so tripped out they revealed themselves, to the vast hilarity of all concerned. The stoned FBI agents worried about losing their jobs. It was Jimmy Holmes who, in sympathy, pointed out that the Lambeth Vietnam Vets Against The War weren't doing much of any political consequence anyhow. The agents happily reported to their superiors that the chapter was neutralized. One of them even rewarded Jimmy by revealing some new bugging technology, which Jimmy adapted to upgrade his better-than-ever stereo.

Jimmy fathered four children during the Seventies. He never knew about one, and the mothers of two more left in search of a less-delirious lifestyle before their offspring were old enough to know their father. Gwen Carson, the mother of the fourth, liked the music and the drugs and the excitement as much as Jimmy. They even had a wedding—though they saw no reason to tell the government about it. There were two wedding cakes. Jimmy's parents, living in the same town and all, had long since resigned themselves to their outrageous son.—Besides, he didn't steal from his neighbors, didn't perpetrate acts of violence, and was universally respected for his skill and generosity as a mechanic.

Gwen's parents lived in Tulsa. They didn't know what to make of their daughter with her flowing honey-blond hair and dresses as loose as her boobs (as she called them), not to mention their grandson already five months old by the time Gwen and Jimmy got around to the wedding. Still less did they know what to make of Jimmy, whose straight brown hair was nearly as long as Gwen's.

Gwen's parents never did realize there was no marriage license. They did realize the wedding cake was going to be carob. That was too much. They ordered a traditional white wedding cake too—four feet high, topped by a little bride in white gown and groom in black tux.—The real bride and groom both wore undyed, embroidered cotton, most of which they removed several hours before leaving their guests for the night. — Gwen's parents were so shocked that the person who officiated at the ceremony was seven months pregnant that it never occurred to them to ask what church she represented.

Aragorn Holmes had nothing to compare his childhood to. Stories of chromosome damage to unborn babies whose mothers took LSD did him no harm. Nor did the pct in the carob wedding cake at his parents' wedding, of which he managed to ingest almost as much as he smeared into his hair. Rock and Roll, car and stereo parts, and the aroma of marijuana smoke were as much a part of his everyday introduction to the world as his mother's milk and later beans and okra. There were always lots of people around to pay attention to him and teach him to do things if his parents were too distracted. Aragorn's early years were happy and full of good company.

But there came a time when Gwen got tired of playing second fiddle to Jimmy Holmes, the man with the magic wrench hand and the endless stash. "I'm a person too!" she screamed one morning as Jimmy drifted from coffee and ignoring the breakfast dishes to yet another tenuous used hardware for dope deal.

"Having her period," Jimmy whispered, with a laugh, to his surprised companion as they headed out through the post oaks, sticker vines and pieces of cars. When Jimmy got back, Gwen was gone, and Aragorn with her.

Jimmy missed Gwen and Aragorn, but still more, he felt humiliated. Two weeks later, Jimmy got a letter from Gwen with an Austin address, telling him he was an egocentric pig. Jimmy drove straight to Austin stopping only for coffee and to piss. Gwen's friends wouldn't let him in the house. While the adults all screamed at each other around the front door, Aragorn climbed out a back window and snuck into his father's car, where he hid under a stack of Chilton's manuals.

After an hour and a half of screaming, the neighbors called the cops. The police knew domestic disputes were where most people, police and civilians, get hurt. They approached the house with some caution. They were relieved when nobody became violent and Jimmy agreed to leave.

Jimmy got back in his fire-engine-red, souped up 1958 Dodge with tail fins, and drove till he came to a highway, which happened to be U. S. 183. The street he was on forced him to get on the highway headed south. What the hell, he thought with a grin; I'm already this far. Jimmy picked up Rt. 59 at Goliad and turned onto Rt. 16 at Freer. He was almost to the Zapata County line when a ten-year-old voice piped up from the back seat: "I gotta whizz."

"Son of a bitch," said Jimmy as he regained control of the wheel.

"Don't you call my Mom names or I'll get out and hitchhike back," Aragorn shouted.

Jimmy pulled over. "Didn't mean it that way, Ari. C'mon up here."

"Let me piss first."

Father and son spent the next week camped at Falcon Lake, wandering around the desert among the mesquite, jumping cactus, and prickly pear trees, eating peyote. Then they headed north with several hundred pounds of buttons rolled up in blankets, towels spare T shirts and every other even remotely clean piece of cloth Jimmy could find anywhere in the car, so the buttons would dry without rotting. They were already north of Dallas when the State Police pulled them over.

"Is something wrong, Officer?" Jimmy asked as he handed over his license.

"This Aragorn Holmes?" the officer asked, nodding to the boy.

"Yes," said Jimmy. "He's my son."

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"His mother reported him missing and gave us your car's description and tag number."

Jimmy bit his lip to keep from saying anything.

"I'm not missing," Aragorn roared. "I'm with my Dad, and that's where I belong."

"Just a minute." The officer stepped away from the car, still holding Jimmy's license. He came back five minutes later. "Well, there's no court finding. What's going on?"

"She left, took the boy while I was at work. I came down to talk. She wouldn't. He chose to leave with me," Jimmy explained, restraining himself from saying anything extra.

"This missing call's a week old," the police officer said.

"Dad took me carping so I could think things over before we got too far from Mom," said Aragorn. "I've thought them over. I want to go home with my Dad."

"Okay, Son," said the cop. "Hope you can all work it out."

The police officer handed Jimmy back his license and waved him on. He was still talking on his radio as Jimmy and Aragorn pulled out.

"You're shaking, Dad," said Aragorn.

"Yeah," said Jimmy.

"Here." Aragorn cut a peyote button in two with his pocket knife and handed half to his father. He popped the other half in his own mouth.

"Were you holding that the whole time?" Jimmy asked.

"I'd just finished cleaning it," Aragorn answered.

"Sheet," said Jimmy. He popped his half of the button in his mouth.

Jimmy and Gwen never did live together again, but they got back on speaking terms. So when Gwen started having visions, she didn't hesitate to let Jimmy know about it. "Must be pregnant again," Jimmy said.

"Gwen had three more children now, by different fathers none of whom she had stayed with. Jimmy had had several relationships too, as transitory as Gwen's, but had avoided conceiving any more children.

"You are a sexist pig," Aragorn answered.

"That's what your mother said."

"She should know."

The years had lightened the intensity without blunting the edge of the insight. Aragorn at just seventeen had a more relaxed sense of humor about his parents than many people achieve at fifty.

Gwen's visions were all about New Mexico. "So what," said Jimmy. "Half the hippies in North America have visions about New Mexico."

"All the more reason to pay attention," said Gwen. Her flaming pink school bus managed to stand out even among the automotive accumulation of Jimmy's yard. She had nine children with her: her own three, plus six more, on a field trip from an alternative school with a Santa Fe address, that did actually run a school but was mostly cover for home schoolers in states where home schooling was illegal.

"I couldn't leave this," said Jimmy, gesturing to the vast piles of what most people would call junk. "It's taken me twenty years."

Jimmy fixed several items on Gwen's bus that she hadn't noticed, such as the four broken lug bolts on the left rear wheel and

the leak in the fuel line. She headed on west in a fourteen-inch Oklahoma late-April rain full of tornadoes.

"She could have waited a day," Jimmy commented to Aragorn the next morning as they surveyed the mud and the roaring ravine at the back of the yard that was bone dry twice as much of the year as it ran a trickle.

"She dreamt it was time to leave," Aragorn replied.

"Guess I better four wheel it."

"If you want to get there," Jimmy said.

Aragorn locked the hubs on the puke green 1956 Willys, shared a bowl of pot with his father, and took off for school through the mud. Sun baked the ruts hard as brick by noon.

An hour later a sheriff's car banged into the yard. Deputy Stan Grover stepped out as Jimmy emerged from the trailer he was building into a mini-crane with heavy duty winch and hydraulic stabilizing arms. "Jesus Q. Reist," said Stan, "that road's a killer."

"Good for business," said Jimmy. "What's up?"

"Got an order from the State of Minnesota to pick up a truant kid. Supposed to be traveling with your ex."

"They headed out yesterday," said Jimmy, "just before the storm hit. I expect they're about to Nebraska by now."

"Just as well," said Stan. "I hate that kind of thing."

"Yeah," said Jimmy, wondering if Gwen and her busload of kids were yet in New Mexico, where the school was legally chartered, or still in the Texas Panhandle or even Oklahoma where conflicting claims of two states might have who knew what relative legal clout.

"Say," said Stan "what you got for tailpipe?"

"For the cruiser?"

"Nah," said Stan. "Don't you take them budget bitches serious. County still buys everything new. For my truck."

"'75 Ford, king cab, right?"

"That's the one."

Rummaging through several piles of parts, Jimmy ascertained that he probably did have a piece of tailpipe that would fit Stan's truck. Stan promised to come back soon, weather and the county grader permitting.

"See," said Aragorn that evening when Jimmy told him about Stan's visit "Mom's not such a flake."

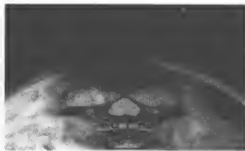
Jimmy wasn't sure he agreed, but he had to admit Gwen's dream had given her good advice . . . assuming the bus made it safely through the storm.

It did. A month later, when school let out, Aragorn decided to visit. When he reached New Mexico, it took him three days to find his mother. She was living in the pink bus with her three children and a sometimes lover, parked behind the home of some friends of hers, a lesbian couple, one of whom was Playing the heroine's widowed mother in the melodrama at Madrid.

Augusta the actress's car wouldn't start when she was ready to leave for rehearsal. "God damned worthless defective starter," she shouted, "I just bought the damn thing."

Aragorn offered to drive her to the parts store for a replacement. "How about driving me to rehearsal now and the parts store tomorrow," she answered. "We're in runthroughs It's lots of fun."

"Okay," said Aragorn.



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When they got to the rehearsal, chaos and disaster reigned. The hero had run off with his girlfriend to parts unknown the night before. The show was due to open in a week. Before he knew what hit him, Aragon found himself with a script in his hands admitting he really didn't need to be back in Oklahoma till school started in August and the show only lasted till Labor Day and they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

Jimmy came out to visit in July. It was a hundred and six in Lambeth, Oklahoma the day he left and hadn't rained in over a month. Madrid, New Mexico got its second rain of the summer two hours before Jimmy arrived. Silver maples sparkled in the scrubbed blue New Mexico breeze. Jimmy didn't have any specific idea how long he'd stay, but the summer climate certainly was nicer. On the other hand, Madrid, New Mexico, had the world's worst water. Aragon was living there now, with the mother and daughter who were playing the hero's widowed mother and the heroine in the melodrama—and sleeping with both of them. Jimmy was impressed—and nearly got himself run out of town when he said so. Aragon convinced Bethany his father was a harmless dinosaur, and Bethany persuaded her mother, Janice, to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Jimmy fixed the vapor lock on Janice's leprous Datsun, which even Aragon had been unable to cure, and started on the plumbing. Janice decided that just maybe Aragon's old man might be a tolerable barbarian. Jimmy still had no specific plans how long to stay, but the water situation fascinated him.

Madrid was an old mining town, not gold like a lot of Western ghost towns, nor even copper. What was mined at Madrid was coal. During mining times, the town didn't have water. The railroad tanked it in on the same spur that hauled out the coal. When the town was revived by assorted cultural refugees in the Seventies, a water association formed and put in a well.

Unfortunately, someone failed to think things all the way through. The well in the midst of all that coal, produced water that smelled like rotten eggs and turned silver instantly black. Out of money, the water association was stuck with this water. Some people liked it on the grounds that, close as they were to Santa Fe, the hideous water was the one thing that kept real estate affordable. Others pointed out that was nonsense. Madrid just had overpriced property with repulsive water.

Be that as it may, Jimmy Holmes took it into his head to figure out just how cheaply he could build a drilling rig and scavenge materials to try again to provide Madrid with water fit to drink. This line of inquiry led him to the equally-complicated question of New Mexico's arcane water law. Drilling, casing and other technical matters aside, to use water you had to own the right to use it. Jimmy soon concluded New Mexico water rights were even more bizarre than Oklahoma mineral rights.

Janice knew a former Madrid currently teaching a course on New Mexico water law at UNM. Jimmy drove down to Albuquerque. "It's summer, so the parking's not quite as insane as during the semester, but watch out anyhow," Janice warned. "They do tow."

Jimmy managed to find a legal parking place and the building where Janice's friend, George, had his office. But there was no

directory in the building, so he found himself wandering the halls looking for the right office. One of several closed doors had the name, Spooner, on it. What the hell? Jimmy thought, no harm in knocking; probably no one there. He knocked.

The door opened. A scrawny, bald man with a huge grey beard stood in the doorway. "I'll be dipped in shit," said Prof. Spooner. "You disgusting son of a bitch. Not only do you still have a full head of hair; it ain't even grey."

Jimmy grinned. They pooled each other on the back.

Prof. Spooner directed Jimmy to George's office, and they agreed to meet in an hour and a half. George had more information on water law than Jimmy knew what to do with. "Municipal's higher priority than Agricultural or Industrial," George explained, "but in your case easements to pipe across private land may be more significant."

"Maybe I better stick to the technical part and let someone else handle the legal end," Jimmy said.

"Can't do that," said George. "To calculate the cost of your water, you have to know what legal access is going to cost."

"So that's why the water association doesn't do anything. It's not just because they're broke and drunk."

George offered to help figure the cost of water rights, easements and anything else his voluminous records might be useful for whenever Jimmy came up with technical specifics. Jimmy thanked him and, his head spinning, headed back to Prof. Spooner's office.

"Let's get the hell out of here," said Prof. Spooner. He lived at Cedar Crest, which was where Rt. 14 turned off the Interstate for Madrid. They both drove to his house.

The Prof was delighted to learn that Jimmy had some Oklahoma home grown bud with him. "And a damn sight better than that ragweed you used to grow," Jimmy said as they smoked a pipe in the Prof's book-lined stucco overlooking a

juniper-covered hillside. "What are you up to?"

"Fixing to retire," said the Prof. "so I can have an income this time while I write my next book."

"What on?" asked Jimmy.

"How Star Wars is going to screw up space travel for the next three hundred years," answered the Prof.

"How's that?"

"You heard about Brilliant Pebbles?"

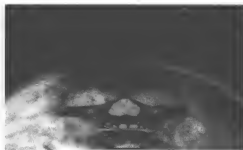
"That like Smart Rocks?"

"That's it."

"Thought they abandoned that idea," said Jimmy.

"Well, they didn't," the Prof answered. "Latest scheme calls for twenty thousand mini-satellites, each one prepared to zap something. And not just in space. System still doesn't work laterally through atmosphere, but straight down the atmosphere's not that thick. So there are ground targets too. Not only is that twenty thousand chances to go haywire and zap the wrong something. It's also twenty thousand pieces of shit floating around up there in the way of anything else. Only, I calculate about fifteen a year will fault out badly enough they have to be blown up—which means about ten thousand pinhead sized pieces of space trash each. You know what happens you get hit at orbital velocities by a chip of paint?"

"Not good, huh?"



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"What it means," said the Prof, "is bye bye any reasonable chance for a real space program."

"Didn't know you were that much into space travel."

"Tell you the truth, I don't really give a damn one way or the other. What I'm into is showing up Star Wars for the idiocy it is."

"Hear you there," said Jimmy.

"So what are you up to," asked the Prof. "Don't tell me you're living in New Mexico too now."

"Well, no," said Jimmy. "My boy came out to visit his mom and got shanghaied by the melodrama at Madrid."

"Why, I saw that show a couple weeks ago. You don't mean to tell me that was your son playing Roger Stalwart?"

"One and the same."

"Well, I'll be dipped in shit. How long you here?"

"Don't rightly know. Hot as it is back home maybe I'll stay all summer."

"You still big on audiovisual?"

"Mostly been mechanickin', crude stuff."

"Like a water system for Madrid."

"Let's not mention that headache."

The Prof laughed.

"If I got you some technical data on those mini-satellites, think you could decipher it for me?"

"Don't know. I'd have to see it. Surely there's someone at the University better qualified than me."

"There's complications."

"How's that?"

"Data I have in mind is classified."

"I see," said Jimmy. "Well, if it's in physicstese, I probably won't know what it says. A wiring diagram."

"I just might be able to tell you what it'll do."

"Would you be insulted at ten bucks an hour?"

"You gonna offer me more if I say yes?"

"Asshole."

"You asked. Hell I'd do what I can for free."

"Take the ten."

"Well, since you twist my arm..."

"Oh, and you got any of that smoke I might buy?"

"A little. Maybe I ought to call up Gus,—He's watching the place,—Have him send me some more."

"You can use my phone if you can do it unrecognizably."

"Surely you're not an important enough outlaw to tap."

"Surely with unauthorized classified information I don't want to find out."

So Jimmy called Gus. "I got a job," he said. "Could you send my work pants?"

"Sure," said Gus, "how many?"

"Couple ought to do it."

"Why don't I just send them all," Gus said.

"Well, okay," said Jimmy, wondering if he was communicating what he meant to.

"How's the weather up there?" Gus asked.

"Nice. Rainbows. How about there?"

"Hotter'n hell."

Jimmy gave Gus a Santa Fe mailing address.

It was five days later when he got over to the post office box in Santa Fe. There was a letter from Gus, with his own address, and a large box with a fictitious return address—obviously in the same handwriting. The box smelled like automotive chemicals,

When Jimmy opened the box, he found that it did, in fact, contain four pairs of his grungiest work pants. These were wrapped around a tightly sealed bundle, which, in turn, contained his entire stash of almost two pounds of marijuana,—Less than a kilo, he thought, remembering back to the days when he used to leave a kilo brick of pot loose on the table. Well, times have changed.

The letter made things slightly more clear. Some character from Minnesota had been snooping around Jimmy's place, asking about Gwen and wanting to buy cocaine. "I told him you don't do coke and neither do I," Gus said, the anger and fear tangible in the slightly shaky handwriting, "I don't know if he's a narc or what, but he's still hanging around, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to clean house."

So why don't you tell me the character's name, you jerk? Jimmy thought. He figured he better warn Gwen. Whoever the man was, his presence probably had something to do with one of the kids in that school she was working with. Well, Jimmy thought, guess I've got all the more incentive to stay away from home a while. Though whether he was better or worse off being in such proximity to Gwen he was not sure. He was sorry now he'd given the Santa Fe address to Gus on the phone as Gwen was using it too.

Later, over a bowl several actually, Jimmy and the Prof caught up some more on old times. The Prof, too, was married and divorced, with a fifteen-year-old daughter and a thirteen-year-old son, living with their mother in Kansas City. Child support was the biggest single factor in how he planned his retirement. "I hit the magic number this spring," he said.

"Magic number?"

"Seventy-five: Age plus years of service."

"Hah!" said Jimmy, looking at his weathered hands, "I suppose I'll be shoveling shit till social security."

"State retirement and social security'll both go bust by then," the Prof said with a smile and shrug.

"What an optimist."

They recalled the last time they had seen each other, when the Prof interviewed Jimmy for the section on Vietnam Veterans Against The War for his second book.

"You still had some of the smoke you'd brought back with you," the Prof recollected with a fond smile.

"Fine shit," Jimmy recalled.

"I don't suppose this is descended from it?" the Prof asked, taking a toke.

"I wish," said Jimmy. "Lost all that seed when I got popped in '79."

"Oh, sorry to hear about that."

"Me too. Let me cop a plea and gave me a suspended two years, but what a hassle!"

"Justifies their budgets."

"Maybe."

"More important, it gives the opposition a criminal record so they can't run for office."

"Maybe," Jimmy answered, "but can you see me running for office?"

They both laughed, then talked about the book the Prof had written. He was quite proud that it was still in print and assigned reading for courses in six universities he knew of. "I even get a royalty check every so often big enough for a lid."

"I guess," said Jimmy, "but it doesn't sound like it did any more to change things than we did with Vets Against The War."



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"You were naive to expect to," the Prof said.

"So what are you hiring me for to play my cousin?" Jimmy asked.

"Cousin?"

"Cousin Sherlock."

"There are two essential points you and he don't have in common," the Prof replied.

"Which are?"

"Unlike you," the Prof declaimed in his best classroom lecture style, "Sherlock Holmes was into cocaine."

"He can have it," said Jimmy.

"And," continued the Prof, raising a finger of the hand holding the little brown wood pot pipe, "he had a logical mind."

"You're evading my question."

"What's that?"

"If you don't expect to have any effect, why are you writing this new book on Star Wars?"

"It's... for my conscience....It's what I do. And it's more likely to do some good than not writing it."

"But you don't expect it to?"

"No," said the Prof. "I don't."

They sat in silence a minute or two. "Hey," said Jimmy, while refilling the pipe, "I thought there were treaties banning military use of space."

"The Indians had treaties too."

"Well, yeah, but aren't there some other governments on those space treaties with enough clout to enforce them?"

"Sure," said Prof Spooner, "the same governments that have enough clout to have their own military space programs... I think. It is an angle to look into."

July turned to August. Jimmy noted, with pleasure, how New Mexico's summer rainy season had the juniper-covered mountainsides green and sparkling at the time of year when Oklahoma was most fried. Aragorn wanted to stay with Bethany and Janice and do his senior year of high school in Santa Fe. Gwen was working with the alternative school again. Jimmy wasn't sure what he was doing, but he somehow found himself indefinitely camped in Prof Spooner's spare bedroom. The Madrid water project was going nowhere, but he got offered part time maintenance work at Sandia Peak. Being at ten thousand feet was a new thrill, and he even got to do some repairs on the aerial tramway, which delighted him.

Jimmy made it a point not to ask the Prof how he obtained his Star Wars information, but there sure was a lot of it. Most of the specifics were in heavy-duty mathematical symbols that might as well have been Chinese to Jimmy. There were diagrams, though; he could figure out at least some of them.

By October, Jimmy wondered what the hell he was doing, but he had no reason to leave and several to stay. November fifth, he was offered a full time job, with benefits, at Sandia Peak, getting ready for ski season. He took it. Two weeks later, he found himself shoveling snow a whole Saturday, at fourteen dollars and a quarter an hour, time and a half overtime. That night, he had dinner with Aragorn, Bethany and Janice.

"You know," said Jimmy, with an approving look, "a lot of men your age would worry about a heart attack to shovel their own car out at ten thousand feet."

"Hell," said Jimmy, "for fourteen and a quarter an hour I'll shovel snow any time." It was only later that it occurred to him to

wonder why such an exchange was any less barbaric initiated by Janice than by himself, ... not to mention why he was camped in the Prof's spare room instead of having a relationship with a woman.

The Prof took accumulated sick leave fall semester. - He claimed stress.—He taught spring semester. "If I can stand to get through this year it increases my retirement enough my ex just might not string me up by the balls."

"Guess I should be grateful Gwen's how she is," said Jimmy.

"You don't know the half of it," said the Prof.

In June the Prof's kids came for a two week visit, an ordeal for all concerned. Jimmy was back to part time at Sandia Peak. He was thinking of quitting. He was sure the real reason he'd been cut back was to avoid benefits.

Aragorn was playing in the melodrama again, as were Bethany and Janice, though not Augusta. Between free housing with Bethany and Janice and odd jobs, Aragorn had, for all practical purposes been supporting himself all year, though Jimmy had given him money sort of regularly for food and clotting. Bethany planned to enter UNM fall semester. Aragorn was talking about finding a job in Albuquerque and renting a house with her.

Then it was July again. Jimmy was amazed to realize he had been in New Mexico a year. Prof Spooner was depressed. His visit with his children had been miserable, and his ex's child support demands were going to force him to teach at least one more year. Jimmy, staying out of the way while the Prof's River kids were there, had made a camping trip to the Jemez. Summer rains were late starting. Cedar Crest was hot. Jimmy spoke glowingly of Indian paint brush-filled meadows and tall pines in the mountains. Prof Spooner suggested the two of them go out there and get some work done on the much-neglected Star Wars book. Jimmy said he'd speak to his boss about taking a week off.

Jimmy's boss wanted him to work three hours Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday every week all summer, without benefits, for fifty cents an hour less than he'd been making. Jimmy told him to go to hell, drove to Santa Fe, got drunk at a bar and ended up sleeping under the stars on a foam pad in the yard of the house, whose owners he had never met, that Gwen was caretaking.

While nursing his hangover with coffee in the morning, Jimmy told Gwen he had quit his job at Sandia Peak and was about to go camping in the Jemez with the Prof.

"Oh good," Gwen said. "That's the place. And you can work on the bus."

"Come again?" said Jimmy through his hangover.

Gwen was still having her visions. ... about survival and renewal and the Continental Divide. That was how the bus happened to be over by Cuba (New Mexico) when the engine seized. Luckily, she knew someone in the area who let her tow it to their yard, but she had to get it out of there eventually—and would need it to live in again when the owners of the house where she was now got back in a month.

Jimmy agreed to work on the bus if Gwen would pay for the parts. She said she would. Jimmy wondered if she had the slightest idea either what repair or replacement of a seized engine could cost or, for that matter, how much money she had. Rather than say anything, he started musing on ways to beg, borrow or trade for tools and whatever else the job might require. He had what was needed back in Lambeth. He hadn't been home in a year.



How We Know What Happened

The camping trip with Prof. Spooner consisted mostly of housekeeping. The plethora of paraphernalia that made Prof's house in Cedar Crest luxurious to Jimmy's standards just made camping complicated. Still, the mountains were beautiful, and the Prof's spirits revived enough to talk some about the Star Wars book and plan a trip to Provo, Utah, where the Prof had located a sympathetic expert on space law. 'There's a great café at Big Water,' the Prof enthused, 'just past Glen Canyon Dam, and we could take a side trip and camp at Bryce Canyon.'

Looking around at the mountain of coolers, cushions and plastic gadgets with which the Prof's camp was making a good show of completely filling the pristine mountain meadow in which they were currently camped, Jimmy wasn't sure about another camping trip with the Prof—even if the Prof did cover all expenses.

'There's a great sign just the Arizona side of the line I got to show you,' the Prof went on. 'Says, "Entering Utah. Don't forget to set your watch back fifty years."'

Jimmy chuckled noncommittally.

The Prof explained further: 'You see, Arizona doesn't keep Daylight Savings Time. Only the Navajo Tribe gets along better with the Federal Government than the State of Arizona, so they do. But the Hopis, or at least the Hopi Tribal Council, gets along better with the State so they keep Arizona Time. So in summer...'

Jimmy's attention drifted to a pair of flickers darting, orange wings flashing in front of a huge Ponderosa pine at the edge of the wildflower-filled meadow. Towering thunderheads held tiny, intense storms between patches of brilliant blue sky.

A couple days later, the Prof headed home to prepare for the class he was teaching second summer session on History of the Civil Rights Movement. Jimmy drove down to Cuba to check out Gwen's bus. The engine was a disaster. The block was cracked, probably because she had neglected to put in any antifreeze the previous winter. Whatever had been in there had all leaked out. It was a wonder she got as far with it as she did.

Jimmy took some measurements. He had an engine out of a truck back in his yard, hopefully still under a tarp and several sheets of plywood, he was convinced he could make fit—if he could just fabricate a way to connect it to the transmission. All it had cost him was cutting torch time to extricate it from the wreck it was in. It wasn't doing any good filling up with rat and mud dauber nests back in Lambeth. He headed for Oklahoma with an orange and purple sunset in the rearview mirror and drove all night—the only way to go in summer. Stars were just dimming to grey as he pulled into the locust-chorused red dust of his yard.

Jimmy felt relieved to sort out things he never expected to leave behind so long back home, but three days was plenty to convince him New Mexico was the place to be, at least in late July. He loaded the truck engine in his pickup, removed the driveshaft from the '56 Willys so he could tow it with him, then filled both the rest of the truck bed and the Willys with anything useful he could think of. Am I moving to New Mex co? Jimmy asked himself. He didn't know, but he figured he might as well have his tools and mementos with him while he figured it out.

Art and Melinda and their three kids—one his, one hers, one both of theirs, didn't mind Jimmy staying in the bus while he got it roadworthy. He left most of his stuff at the Prof's house, but brought the Willys with him. The Prof had more Star Wars diagrams, Jimmy accepted them, once again not asking where they

came from. He did ask how the Prof could use any information in them without getting in trouble.

'It's amazing how much of this stuff you can learn in POPULAR SCIENCE or ABSOLUTE MAGNITUDE,' the Prof said.

'So why bother with this?' Jimmy indicated the clandestine documents.

'The public articles are very generalized. You could extrapolate from them. With real specific information, you know what direction the extrapolation should go.'

'I guess,' said Jimmy. 'Sounds like you could still get in trouble.'

'I take my cue from the alchemists,' the Prof answered. 'They had the Inquisition to worry about, you know.'

'Did any of them really make gold?' Jimmy asked.

'Not the point. The ones worth while said, "Our gold is not the vulgar gold." They called themselves "Natural Philosophers." They also had a policy to, "Explain the obscure by the still more obscure."'

'Guess I'll leave the politics to you.'

'You just see if you can make any sense of these diagrams.'

'Okay.'

And maybe it was just because he could not understand any of the mathematics that explained what the system was supposed to do that Jimmy noticed something unplanned it might do.

Some days Jimmy Holmes fabricated fantastic fittings to enable a 1964 International truck engine to connect to a 1957 Ford transmission out of God only knew what in a 1953 GMC flaming pink school bus. Some days he explored the high Jemez in the puke green 1956 Willys and afoot.

Some evenings, Jimmy smoked dope with Art and Melinda or told them stories about the Sixties, an era which they, being nearly fifteen years younger, didn't remember but which lived for them all the same through its music. Other evenings, Jimmy studied what he thought of as wiring diagrams, though there was really hardly any wire involved, on documents he knew could get him in far more trouble if anyone knew he had them than the dope he smoked while he studied them.

Jimmy discovered several things. One was a coded series of some information which didn't appear to correlate with anything in the diagrams. He mentioned this to the Prof, who got someone—Jimmy was just as glad not to know who and hoped whoever it was didn't know about him either — to look into the matter. The Prof became convinced what Jimmy had discovered was a series of dates. The dates coincided with launches by the Chinese as well as the American space program, but not the Russians, Japanese, or Europeans.

'Do you suppose,' Jimmy asked one day in late August while he and the Prof were out in the bus on a test ride, 'that means Star Wars is not only not canceled but, at least partly, in place?'

'Wouldn't surprise me a bit,' the Prof said.

'But who's on what side?' asked Jimmy.

'I'm not sure it matters,' said the Prof.

'That's a chilling thought,' said Jimmy.

That evening, he showed the Prof the other thing he had figured out, the thing he might never have seen if he had known enough



Absolute Magnitude

math to know what the electronics in the mini-satellites were supposed to do.

"See this?" Jimmy pointed to a circuit that meant not a thing to the Prof.

"Yes," the Prof answered uncertainly.

"That's a communications system. It's connected here and here to the system that allows each mini to lock onto its target and here to a clock."

"Oh," said the Prof, "I know what that's for. One of the ways they save mass is to let each mini communicate what it sees to the whole system. Time synchronization is how the system makes sense to itself of the information."

"Yeah," said Jimmy, "that figures, but you see this circuit here about half a gasp to the left?"

"Yes."

"It shouldn't happen, of course. But it would only take one short right there to turn a command for shared information into a command for the whole shebang to fire - all at once."

"Shit!"

"Yeah."

"What would that do?"

"Don't know. Fry all the targets anyhow, I guess."

"Think it would blow the Earth apart?" asked the Prof. "That's what some people thought the bomb would do. First nuclear reaction they set off they weren't sure it would ever stop."

"You mean that first bomb here in New Mexico?"

"No, the first time they didn't make a bomb, just a nuclear reaction. . . in a salt mine under Chicago."

"Sheet. Well, I don't think this'll blow up the Earth either," said Jimmy. "There's not really a blast to it in the explosive sense, let alone anything nuclear. The technology's been through a couple generations; I think this version makes a kind of laser-shaped electric pulse."

"Real directional, you mean?"

"And real intense. What it does is more like a flash than an explosion—or a super short circuit. Penetrating atmosphere would burn out the original zap pretty quick, but the short-out flash would radiate outward. You'd need some math I don't know to tell you how far, maybe a few miles."

"Wonder what the probability is it could happen."

"I don't know that either," said Jimmy, "but there's twenty thousand chances—along with twenty thousand chances for some smaller disasters—like fouling the spaceways like you talked about."

"That may have already happened."

"Wonder if that's why space exploration stays so puny."

"Could be. Thank you. You have given me a lot of food for thought."

"Green's my favorite shade of gratitude."

"That and a free copy of the book, you mercenary bastard."

It was another five years before the Prof's book was published. No one even raised questions about unauthorized access to classified information. Jimmy's speculation on accidental firing helped deflect any such notion. It was one of several points most vehemently poo-pooed in reviews -- and one of the points that made the book sell best.

Jimmy never had the patience to read even the public unclassified math-laced articles on how the system worked. No one who knew the official version could take seriously Jimmy's description, which the Prof used, uncredited, nearly verbatim: "Fry the transformer on every power pole in Albuquerque. . . or Baghdad...and maybe your brain too." Ridiculing an obviously cruder divergent description of what happened when the system fired, reviewers deprecated all the more stridently the further suggestion of a misfire. The Prof neither knew nor cared whether Jimmy or the reviewers knew what they were talking about. Positive reviews of the Prof's protests of space clutter only bored the public. In calling attention to Jimmy's dramatic images, the very reviewers who so-panned that part of the book sold copies.

Six thousand of the original ten thousand hardback printing sold. ZAPPED FROM THE SKY went into both paperback and electronic editions. The Prof didn't get rich, but he did get to promote his book on several TV talk shows.

Prof Spooner delivered a signed hardbound copy of ZAPPED FROM THE SKY, in person, to Jimmy Holmes back at Jimmy's place in Lambeth. The Prof had managed to retire, at last, and was buying forty acres near Gallina, not far from where he and Jimmy had camped.

It was a humid Oklahoma late spring. Whip-poor-wills and tree frogs called in the pos: oaks around Jimmy's red mud and junk-strwn yard. He had just seen yet another relat onship with a woman fall apart; he seemed never to be able to understand why. The Prof's visit and the dedication he wrote into the copy of the book he gave Jimmy was the best up Jimmy had had in two months. "Well, is it having any effect?" Jimmy asked.

"Politically," said the Prof, "no, but I do seem to be developing a new career as an entertainer. You ought to come up this

summer and see my land."

"Maybe I will. The boy's still out there. He and Carmen are talking about getting married."

"Who's Carmen?"

"It has been a long time. They've been together almost two years. Say, you remember, the day I ran into you, about the water at Madrid?"

"Yes. It's putrid as ever."

"Remember I was going to build a drilling rig?"

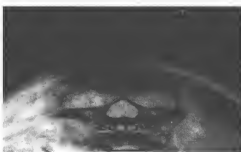
"Yes."

"Well, I did. You going to need a well at your new place?"

"As a matter of fact yes."

And that's how Jimmy Holmes happened to be in New Mexico when it happened, why he was around to witness his ex-wife persuade their son and his girlfriend to give up steady, if mediocre jobs in Albuquerque to move to the mountains because Gwen's visions were increasingly urgent. That well is why Jimmy was camped near the Continental Divide in Northern New Mexico and thus lived to see the result of the event whose possibility he had predicted.

Anyone who read Prof Spooner's book knew what happened. It was a little eerie how many of the survivors had read the Prof's



How We Know What Happened

book. But knowing what happened when it did would not have told you what to do beforehand, . . . Gwen wasn't the only one with visions.

No official admission was ever issued that the Star Wars system was deployed, but even editorial debates in the mass media treated it as obvious fact. Official denials ceased to be even effective joke material. The same government officials who still denied it was up there sometimes issued the loudest complaints about how orbital clutter in otherwise-optimal geosynchronous corridors had increased both the cost and the risks of space exploration.

And, of course, the very thing Jimmy Holmes had foreseen did happen. What neither he nor Prof Spooner foresaw was the effect when twenty thousand mini-satellites fired their ray guns—the popular image was all too apt; it really always was Star Wars—straight down. The designers of the synchronization system would have been proud to know it worked perfectly. Unfortunately for them, most of that team were right on one of the targets.

But the people, military installations, power stations, and major and medium sized cities that got zapped were a mere rain shower in the ocean. The strike also had an effect analogous to a brief moment of friction on the Earth's spin. This would have been catastrophic in itself, causing, as it did, immediate horrendous earthquakes at stress points on innumerable faults both major and minor.

The hesitation in the Earth's spin, tiny by scale of planetary mass, was still sufficient momentarily to degrade the gyroscopic effect of the spin. Due to uneven distribution of the Earth's continental matter and to the much greater accumulation of the polar ice caps over land than water, this was enough that the Earth's natural wobble overbalanced.

Had the disruption of spin itself been much greater, the Earth might have torn itself apart or whipped so much of its atmosphere off into space that no higher animals, including human beings, would have survived. As it was, a mile high tidal wave broke on the California coastal ranges and lapped up the west slope of the Sierras. Thousands of tornadoes formed. Large portions of Europe and Africa disappeared under water, while other land rose in both the Atlantic and Pacific. The mass of Hawaii helped restabilize the Earth—by rising to Himalayan altitude near the new location of the North Pole. Space junk became irrelevant, but atmospheric junk, along with redistributing ice caps, caused it to rain most of the time nearly everywhere for years—except in the new polar regions where it snowed.

It was, of course, not altogether accurate to say that the poles moved to new locations. The poles shifted only in the relative sense that the sun daily appears to traverse the sky. It was the Earth's mass, not its axis, that tipped. The poles did end up at new locations on the Earth's surface. But inclination to the sun was, luckily for what was left of humanity and other struggling species, perturbed through the entire cataclysm by less than half a degree.

Even with world wide human population reduced to only about three hundred thousand, life was very difficult. Aragorn and Carmen were among those three hundred thousand survivors. They eventually had five children—and lost three of them to illnesses that, even without modern medicine probably would not have been fatal if there had been more sunlight and more consistent good nutrition available.

And how was it that Aragorn, Carmen, and Jimmy Holmes were all among so small a number of survivors? Gwen too, as well as the

two of her other three children who were still with her, though, sadly, she later lost one of those to an accident. Nor did Prof Spooner live through the catastrophe; he was on the telephone back in Cedar Crest, planning another speaking tour, the day the Earth tipped over. But how did so many closely related individuals happen to be among so few survivors? Gwen's visions.

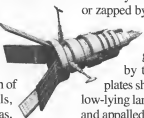
Even if anyone had realized what effect the Star Wars strike would have, it would have been impossible, by rational means, to know what two places on Earth would offer the best chance of survival because the time of the strike determined just where in its natural wobble the Earth was when it tipped. But it would have been possible to know there were just two places with much higher survival odds than anywhere else. Those two spots were the two poles of the axis of the tip.

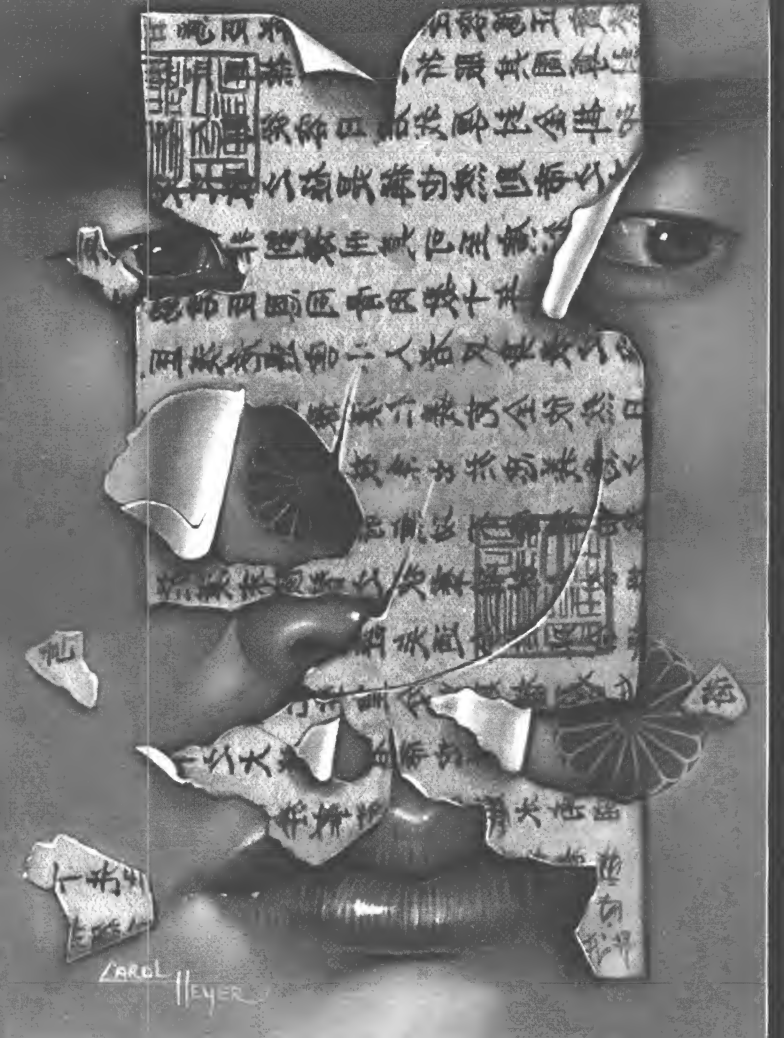
The axis of the tip was the axis around which the Earth's poles turned on the curve, compounded of the motion of the tip and the Earth's continuing spin, that the poles followed from their old positions to their new ones. The poles of the tip were located on the lines where old and new latitudes crossed, which gave them the survival advantage that they ended up at the same latitude as where they began. But far more important to immediate survival, they also experienced far less jolt than anywhere else as the velocity of the Earth's spin, essentially unchanged by its momentary trauma, accelerated in a new direction. As a result, destruction was far less severe within a few hundred miles of those two points than anywhere else—if you didn't get mashed by falling trees, collapsing canyons, or zapped by one of the Star Wars strikes themselves.

Of course, if those points had been located on a low coastal plain they would have done nobody any good as they would have been washed completely over by the sweep of relocating oceans as entire continental plates shifted wildly. But the poles of the tip were not located on low-lying land. One was in the Indian Ocean, where several terrified and appalled shiploads of people did in fact live to tell the tale. The other was near the Continental Divide in Northern New Mexico.

Just as Gwen's visions indicated and as there was no other way to tell, just as lots of seemingly-flaky individuals' visions had indicated, the mountains of Northern New Mexico and nearby areas were the best survival spot there was. In fact, fully half the three hundred thousand human beings left alive after the Earth tipped over were within three hundred miles of that spot.

Thanks to Gwen's visions and the melodrama at Madrid, with its awful water, Jimmy Holmes was among those survivors. Jimmy never did manage to have a relationship with a woman that worked. But he did get to watch two of his grandchildren grow up to have children of their own. Thanks to Jimmy's greater knowledge of practical wiring than fancy math, and the late Prof Spooner's entertaining if politically ineffective book, we know what happened.





CAROL
MEYER

Shirabe

by Robert J. Lapointe

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Each afternoon toward dusk the shadow of Doom would pass over Yutaka's house. For a moment the sky would darken and a stillness enter the dwelling. After an extended instant the shadow would slip away across the field, over the neighboring homes and businesses, down to the beach and out over the churning waters of the Sea of Japan. Yutaka, who was only six, watched with shining eyes as the ship rose higher and higher, up into a realm of wind and clouds, into a radiant infusion where nothing had changed since the day of creation.

In five hours, after he and his family had gone to bed and the stars had risen, Doom would return from its journey over China. Its bomb bays emptied, its helium-berlithium tanks nearly dry, the ship would hover above the American base at the sea's edge, give a regretful hiss of ballast, and settle to earth as its time-shift satellites gathered in a ring around it and brought it fully into the present.

Yutaka had seen it on several occasions while studying late, and he was ever in awe of the ship's size. He thought what a wonderful thing it must be to lift away from the earth, to escape the dust and heat and float over strange new places. He grew troubled as he imagined the distant sound of the bombs as they exploded far below, splashing pools of gold and red across the hills of Changsha and Hunan. He turned his mind away from these thoughts. With the remote quiet of one returning from a far journey, he went downstairs to join his mother.

The sounds of evening rose to meet him. His mother was in the kitchen preparing dinner, and Yutaka could hear the window fan blowing the heat of cooking out into the backyard. The stereo was playing Schubert, as it had been lately. It was his mother's recent favorite, and she played the same pieces over and over, like a teenager wearing out a new album.

In the dining area adjoining the kitchen, Yutaka fell on a floor mat and picked up the evening paper. "Done studying so soon?" his mother asked. Her tone balanced between inquiry and challenge.

"Yes, mother."

"Who were the last ten Prime Ministers?"

He listed them, concluding "Nakasone, Toyo."

She continued with her cooking, dissatisfied not with Yutaka, but with the answer itself. "And the Toyo administration? What will happen with it?"

"Toyo will be Shogun, everyone expects it!"

Yutaka's mother said nothing, only stirred the simmering food with a look of childlike distraction.

Yutaka flipped through the paper, looking for something he could understand. "How long until dinner?"

"Half an hour."

"Late?"

"I had trouble with your Grandfather."

"Ojisan?"

"He's okay, Yutakasan. We just disagree about something."

"About his room? About his staying in it? Is that what it is, Mom?"

His mother returned to her cooking, too tired and distant to say anything, and Yutaka was left feeling ashamed. He felt he shouldn't have raised the topic.

He gathered up the paper and folded it, focusing his thoughts on what was on the front page. American troops had crushed the remaining opposition at Nanking, forcing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee south. In the morning, the Diet was expected to declare the area a disaster, making it eligible for annexation into the Prosperity Zone and reconstruction assistance from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry. What did all this mean? Why did the Americans bomb, and the Japanese repair? It seemed that there must be hundreds of Japanese groups in China busy with things he couldn't fathom.

He turned to another story. It discussed Japanese citizens' groups complaints to the American forces in Japan. Now here was a story he knew something about! Many times Yutaka had heard his mother complain about the American ship's time-phase equipment malfunctioning. She considered it the cause of old Mrs. Kijima's smooth skin, and the flowers near the market blooming in winter, and a dozen other things, all of which Yutaka could list. And look! The newspaper named communities that had complained, and there was his Prefecture, Totori! It was going on right here where he lived! It excited him to see his Prefecture named in the newspaper. He already considered himself an expert on the subject from listening to his mother; now the paper had confirmed it!

But he didn't understand what the time-phase thing that all the adults were arguing about had to do with Ojisan coming out of his room. That puzzled him.

As seemed the routine, the evening meal was quiet. Yutaka's mind was on many things, but he didn't want to ask questions. Yutaka's mother thought of her father, her husband, worries and fancies that inhabited the long corridors and solitary places of her mind. Out of duty she had taken Ojisan his evening tea, though Yutaka would gladly have done so.

Yutaka's father, five years dead, could offer neither of them advice, so they sat in silence, surrounded by their thoughts. Upstairs they could hear the occasional rasp of the old man's feet on the tatami mats.

Twilight entered the home. Shadowed corners deepened into gloom as Yutaka's mother cleared the table. "Go collect the tea tray from grandfather, and tell him we'll be up later with cake," she said, then added, "and bring down some potatoes for tomorrow."

Upstairs, a fuzzy yellow light shone on the polished wood of the hall floor, and seeing the color of the light, Yutaka felt that somehow it added to the heat of the day. At the door to his grandfather's room, Yutaka squinted through the diffusion created by the stasis net. The room beyond seemed a jumble of half-tones. Lines and edges blurred into a curved display of meaningless borders. Wherever Yutaka focused, he could make out only the vaguest shapes, and overall it looked to him like knitting needles and a ball of string.

He called out, "Ojisan?"

At the limit of his vision a distortion appeared and gained size, drawing near. The distortion swam toward him, shimmering at the edges, and presently his grandfather stood in the doorway. "Yutaka."

He smiled at his grandfather, an elderly man with the smooth skin of someone who had spent time in a stasis cell. He was dressed in

simply cut clothes, and his eyes shone blackly, seemingly the only feature not disturbed by the stasis net. "Have you finished your tea?" Yutaka asked.

"Long ago." The old man pushed a tray through the net. The perpetuity field bulged outward, then made a small popping noise. Yutaka took the tray.

"Mother wants some potatoes."

The old man retrieved them. They were half green, half aged to rotting; shoots had grown out like rancid tentacles. Yutaka said nothing.

"Where did you go today, Ojisan?"

"Always the same place these days, Yutaka. Back to my old neighborhood, the one we left during the war. I try to stay, but the field is failing. The American ships set up a distortion. It's really no good anymore, you know."

"I'm sorry, Ojisan."

"It doesn't matter. I should be here and now, not there and then." Ojisan sat on the floor near the field. "Yutakachan, sit with me and listen awhile." Yutaka sat down obediently, eager to hear what his grandfather would tell him.

His grandfather pulled his feet snugly under himself and began. "Yutakachan, there's an old story. In it, two monks come to a rain-swollen river and find a beautiful young woman waiting to get across. Even though monks aren't supposed to touch women, one of the monks, without hesitation, picks her up and carries her to the other side. He sets her down, and the two monks continue on. That evening the one monk says, 'You touched a woman.' And the other answers him by saying 'I set her down on the bank; are you still carrying her?'"

"What do you think that means, Yutakasan?"

Yutaka thought he knew what it meant. "Don't worry about things after they're over."

Ojisan smiled at him through the field. "Smart little man! That's certainly one meaning. Let me know if you think of any others!"

Yutaka gave a frown of confused surprise. "Others? I don't know them, Ojisan." Then he brightened. "But we'll be up later with cake!"

"Don't bother, I'm coming down."

"Yes, Ojisan."

"Today I am eighty-one years old. The net doesn't work anymore. It's time I returned to the present and lived out my life." Then the image shifted and began to come apart as activities at the American base set up a conflicting signal and Yutaka's grandfather was pulled into another time.

Yutaka smiled uncertainly and backed away down the hall.

He delivered the potatoes to his mother, though they were ruined. She looked at them but said nothing.

Yoshiko Masawara, mother to Yutaka and widow to the late Kenichiro Masawara, prepared dinner with the abstract attention of a person repeating motions performed across a lifetime. The window she stood before offered a view of the fields behind their house. The fields lay bare after the harvest, divested of all but brittle stalks and random clusters of brown, curling leaves that hung on the stems like the husks of dead insects. As she looked at the field, Yoshiko gradually let her imagination spread out so that it came to inhabit the rows of brown clod and the undulating bands of heat above them.

The heat wavered with the even regularity of the breath of a sleeping child, lulling Yoshiko into a pleasant reverie. Her anxieties

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about her father were put aside for the moment, or perhaps inverted, and rather than worrying about his present and his future, she found herself recalling the days of her childhood when her father had been a teacher.

In those days, Japan had been in a frenzy to take a place with the leading nations of the world, and Yoshiko had viewed her father, a music teacher, as one of the men helping the country learn and catch up. Soon it became apparent that Japan had not only caught up with the world but had surpassed much of it. This seemed to be the reward so many people had hoped and worked for.

Few people had considered what being a leading nation might entail.

Then one day, when she was in college, she had come home to find her father in his den sitting quietly by the window. She passed down the hall, not wanting to disturb him, but he called her back.

"Yoshiko," he said, "do you know that my teaching duties have been altered?"

She smiled at him, puzzled, and waited for him to tell her.

"I may no longer teach the Chinese Classics."

She joined him by the window then, and they wondered together what it might mean.

Night lay in the street outside, cool and dark, as though it had hid under the houses all day and seeped back into the street after the sun was down. A few storefront signs flickered at intervals. The Chinese tea shop at the corner was dead that evening, and its owner stood at the front door with the patience of a man waiting for eternity to arrive.

After dinner Yutaka's mother gave him a half hour of free time before bath and bed, and as was his habit, he wandered across the street and sat in a pool of darkness beneath a plum tree. Branches heavy with age arched above the sidewalk, and there was a small stone bench set back from the road. The tree was ancient, but parts of its trunk showed the smooth green bark of a tree in its first spring.

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Yutaka wondered if the time shift had affected the tree. He hoped not; it was his favorite.

He sat for a few minutes watching his house and letting his thoughts settle. He could see that the lower floor of his home was brightly lit, while upstairs a foggy yellow glow seeped from a lone window.

He began to try to sort things out. Ojisan lived in a room that helped him live a long time but not in "real" time, whatever that was. Now, though, the room, the "net," was broken, and Ojisan wanted to leave the room, and his mom wasn't sure what to do, but she wasn't sure about much of anything these days. And she acted like a kid — interesting thought! — was his mom affected by the American base? Hmmm. He wasn't sure.

At the very least, if the net was truly failing, then his grandfather would give up the special room and start living in "real" time again, even though it might mean less time. Yutaka was happy that Ojisan would be with them, really with them, but troubled that he might leave them sooner... though that could happen even sooner if the net was broken. What a mess! No wonder his mom was confused.

As Yutaka tried to bring order to all this, there was a flash high above the American base, and one of the time-phase satellites began to spin crazily. An arc of rose light stabbed downward and wove a zigzag of illumination that briefly set Yutaka and his tree alight with a soft scarlet glow. The beam moved away, but by then Yutaka's mind was far adrift.

Night gathered in fullness around him. Above the street, the stars brightened until the sky swarmed with flickering lights. Yutaka watched them through the canopy of branches overhead. He thought of nothing in particular, soaking in inertia until he was more relaxed than he had been in many months. A Konstruct passed down the street, swinging a baton and shining a light on posters pasted along a wall by the right wing. Some demanded the closure of the American bases, others sought Toyo as Shogun, still others simply displayed the crest of the Chrysanthemum throne. The Konstruct shrugged its police uniform into a nattier fit and moved down the street. Konstructs are friendly and helpful; Yutaka had been taught this in school.

Finally he heaved himself up and returned home. He felt good. He felt smarter and more sure. He felt... older.

Inside, the house was as warm as when he had left it, and he felt the heat of the place moving into him almost at once. He entered quietly and could hear his mother and the old man conversing in soft tones in the living room. It was done; Ojisan had left the cell. Now he would begin aging again. There was not much more to it than that. Yutaka's thoughts were well formed now; the dimensions of things were clearly defined.

In the darkened front room where he stood, Yutaka slowly regarded his surroundings. Ever since he was very young, he had

been unable to escape the feeling that a dark room was somehow frozen in time, preserved in secret, and known only to the person who was a part of it during that instant preceeing movement and the continuity it would bring.

He drew a careful breath, unwilling to disturb whatever invisible fibers of necessity extended through him, the walls, the darkness, linking him to the moment. Before him rose a breakfront, built long ago by a craftsman of Shikoku. On its topmost shelf rested a green urn. It sat squarely at the center of the piece, and had for as long as Yutaka could remember. And for as long as he could remember, he had been nervous about having such a breakable thing perched at such a height. The urn seemed to lean outward toward the edge of the shelf.

Yutaka's grandfather had recovered it from the ashes of his parents' home after their neighborhood was razed toward the end of the war. He had kept the urn, though there had no doubt been many occasions when he could have used the money it would have brought as an artifact of Edo. Ojisan never spoke of the war, but Yutaka knew that he had experienced many frights and hardships during it, many deprivations afterward. Yutaka's attitude toward this urn and his feelings about his grandfather were not separate.

Yutaka focused on the object. It was coated with a dark green enamel that had been charred black in the fires of the bombing. At the bottom, on one side, the glaze had actually been brought to a boil, and the urn wore a beard of hard bubbles. Areas of the lip at the top had been chipped away, lending it a brittle appearance.

At the lower center of the front face, the artist had etched the Kanji character for melody in the precise calligraphy of old Japan. Yutaka read the character and mouthed the sound represented, repeating it quietly to himself, hoping to evoke the enduring qualities that it and his grandfather shared — Shirabe. He made the sounds over and over until they became a sort of chant, compressing the years between the urn's inception and its present.

He thought about the image, the personal meaning he attached to the word as it was used in this context, etched in the urn. It called to his mind a song sung long ago, but now lost. The exact tune was a mystery to him. As a young child, really only just recently, he had felt that the character referred to a specific melody, and he had asked his mother to sing it to him. He had not understood that the etching referred to no song in particular, and on some level he still believed that the urn's inscription referred to a specific song, a song of Edo, perhaps.

Yutaka had spent long hours imagining what the tune might be, and now, as he listened intently, he thought he heard the song he had imagined as a child. It trembled at the edge of audibility, a fragile strain that beckoned and eluded. He closed his eyes, searched inwardly, but the song remained fugitive, a gentle fragment of sound soft as a May breeze that gradually faded away across the vistas, leaving behind a memory and a sylvan stillness.

When he again focused his attention on the urn, it seemed to have moved closer to the edge, but he no longer felt uneasy about the object's nearness to destruction. Instead, he was thrilled to see it. It seemed to embody a prospect, to quiver with possibility and draw animation from that possibility. There, up above him, at the edge of the shelf, the urn spoke to him in a voice of logic and innate essences. Yutaka heard its message. By embodying possibilities and being subject to chance, it was joined to him and was as much a living thing as if it were a part of him.

Shirabe

The urn pulsed with a nearness to this prospect of death, and death inhabited it like a darkly shining spirit. Somewhere in its future the black hand of fate traced a smooth line along its surface, and it existed as a thousand shards.

This image jarred Yutaka's mind. He knew the other meaning of the Zen story.

In the living room, Yutaka could hear the old man speaking in his husky murmur. He moved through the shadows and into the living area, where his mother sprawled childishly on a floor pillow listening to the old man speak. He joined her wordlessly, feeling stiff as he sat and noticing for the first time a sprinkling of age spots on the back of his hand. Odd for a six-year-old, he thought. On the television, the crest of the Chrysanthemum House shone boldly. What could it mean? Had there been a declaration? But the sound had been turned off, and the screen made its statement silently, as if the image spoke for itself.

Yutaka saw it and knew the future it announced. Toyo was Shogun. The Chrysanthemum House would again hold communion with Ise, and the Americans would be expelled. In time, the Empire would turn its attention east and breathe life into Ojisan's memories.

The old man stood by the window. His back was straight and strong, and his hair was dark, only peppered with a little gray. He seemed firm and young, as though the distorted net had delivered to Yutaka and his mother a different man from the one who had gone in.

Yutaka could see the night sky over his Grandfather's shoulder. High above the American base the airship was descending after its nightly run to China. Landing lights shone from its belly, some stationary, others, red and blue, describing eager circles as they scanned the field and returned the signal of the time-shift satellites that masked the ship during its travels. The old man watched without any sign of emotion as the ship made its descent. Lights flashed in sequence along the hull, and ballast was emitted like breathy sighs on a hot August night, whispers that brushed the rooftops.

"I know the other meaning now, Ojisan."

His grandfather turned to look at him questioningly. Yutaka saw that his grandfather was much younger than he remembered him.

"Of the Zen story, Ojisan," Yutaka continued.

"Yes, Yutakan. Let's hear the other meaning."

"You were talking about returning to the past instead of leaving it, and then you told the Zen story, and the obvious meaning was to forget the past. But the other meaning is even more obvious."

"What is it, Yutakan?"

"At the end of the day the woman was there waiting for him, in the other monk's words. He had picked her up, and she was still with them. That is the fact, and in Zen the facts are connected. The present is as connected to the past as you are to me."

For a long time they stayed where they were, saying nothing. Then Ojisan turned again to the window. "We weren't sure the American planes would ever find our neighborhood — or perhaps we hoped they had forgotten us. Our street was one of the last ones bombed. Most of the other neighborhoods of Tokyo had long since been turned into wastelands. Asakusa, Ueno, Akasaka, Roppongi, I had a friend in Roppongi ..." He rattled off the names of the places in a droning voice and the syllables mixed until — "Shin ... ju ... ku" — Yutaka could not tell where the words began and ended and the sounds, low, deep-throated, and regular, came — "SHI BU YA" — like the droning of a Buddhist funeral chant.

"SHIN BA SHI
O SA KI
GIN ZA
SHI NA
GA WA HA

RA JU KU, where my mother took me shopping for school clothes — all these places were dead.

"Everywhere around us the houses were blooming magnificent frightening colors, pushing up columns of smoke that slanted in the wind. All the doors were blasted off their hinges, and the entrance to our home looked like a gate into the sun.

"One of the children from next door, a little boy, had been separated from his family. He was a few years younger than me, probably only four or five, close to your age now.

"I took him by the hand and we ran together down the street and my family seemed to get farther and farther ahead. I wanted to leave him the whole time, so I could run and catch up, but I didn't."

He paused for a moment, and Yutaka wondered if he had lost his train of thought. The silence continued, and he and his mother, listening to the old man, and at the same time aware of their own fleeting impressions, sat still and tense in the evening heat.

The old man drew a deep breath, as if the air itself was rich with memories. "That day the colors were surely the brightest, and the noise was overpowering. I thought I was going to die."



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Book Reviews

Reviews by Mike Jones

***Eccentric Circles*, by Rebecca Lickiss, Ace, 218 pages, \$5.99, ISBN 0-441-00828-3**

Piper Pied, aspiring writer, has just received the surprise of her lifetime. Her grandmother, a woman who she hadn't even seen in six years, has passed away. At the funeral, Piper's relatives conspire against her, manipulating her into fulfilling a very specific term of Grandma Dickerson's will. As a result, Piper inherits her grandmother's Victorian home, located at the very edges of a Colorado suburb. A beautiful house, it's filled with the books and magazines and remnants of Grandma Dickerson's eccentric collecting habits. It has a lovely view from the front door, and an even better view from the back door. In fact, the view from the back door is out of this world. Literally. In fact, it's a portal to the land of Fairy, a dimension inhabited by creatures of our imagination and scripted by our popular literature.

Thus, when Piper goes to explore the world outside her door, she discovers three very strange, very stereotypical creatures, one of which turns up in her own kitchen. Aelvarim is a gorgeous elf, Larkingtower is a reclusive and misogynistic wizard, and Malroux is a charming, albeit grumpy dwarf. Not only do they represent certain archetypal figures found in "classic" fantasy, but they also fit the male trinity of youth, father figure, and grandfather figure. And none of them are particularly satisfied with their roles in life. That's not the problem. Under normal circumstances, Piper might even be able to deal with the new weirdness in her life, balancing it with her own writing career and a part-time job in a local bookstore. These aren't normal circumstances.

Aelvarim is convinced to a fault that Grandma Dickerson was murdered, and before long he has Piper aiding him in a search for clues, for the killer, and for a manuscript supposedly written by Piper's grandmother before she died. If that weren't enough, holes in reality are beginning to swallow Fairy and Earth, piecemeal. Are these events connected? And how can Piper solve the first and stop the second? If she can't, reality itself will cease to exist. Piper will have to embrace her own inner power, accept her role in the story, and even tap into the magic of creativity to rewrite the ending,

if she wants things to work out happily ever after, or even just happily for a while.

Eccentric Circles is sly and intelligent, commenting on the power of the imagination, suggesting that our subconscious influences not just the world around us but other worlds entirely, speculating on the symbiotic relationship of the mundane and the otherworldly. Rebecca Lickiss reimagines Tolkien as a shaper of worlds, and popular literature as a catalyst for cultural change, and does so with a keen sense of story and characterization that makes the book rather too short for the immense potential suggested as a result. She's opened an interesting can of literary worms with this, her debut novel, and hopefully she'll use them as bait for subsequent stories. I'm looking forward to her next release, in the hopes that it'll be longer, and more complex, as I think she's got a lot of as-yet untapped potential. Give this one a perusal.

***The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century*, edited by Harry Turtledove and Martin H Greenberg, Del Rey, 432 pages, \$18.00, ISBN 0-345-43990-2**

Imagine a world where the South won the Civil War because of the outcome of a single battle.

Or a world where a portal links past and future, throwing everything into chaos and confusion. A ferry that travels between the worlds, and a girl who's committed suicide seven times. A world where the concrete knowledge of the existence of other timelines makes every decision, however drastic, ultimately trivial. Worlds where the Nazis won, where the Kennedy family harbors a dreadful secret that could destroy a nation's morale, or a world where the bombing of Hiroshima unfolds in a slightly different manner. These are only some of the paths taken in this new anthology edited by a master of the alternate history genre, Harry Turtledove.

Fourteen stories, all taking different routes through time and space to show us what might have been, or what could be, if events had transpired differently. Fourteen stories in which a man's presence in the wrong place can destroy the future, or a single decision can alter the past, and even more bizarre explorations of the effect such worlds can have on their discoverers. While the declara-

tion of "the best" can often be hard to agree upon, it's a sure bet that these stories represent some of the more intriguing and noteworthy reaches of the genre. "What if?" has always been one of the great tropes of the science fiction field, and each of these stories utilizes it to its full potential.

Standouts in an already noteworthy gathering include Ward Moore's brilliant "Bring the Jubilee," a tale blending time travel and alternate history to explore how fragile the outcome of the Civil War really was, Kim Stanley Robinson's "The Lucky Strike," which explores the power of one man to make a difference when the fate of thousands hangs in the balance, Larry Niven's "Myriad Ways," an intensely personal look at what the existence of alternate timelines does to one man, and Allen Steele's "The Death of Captain Future," a stunning tale of space travel, personal choices, and heroism in a world where we took to the stars decades earlier.

Chosen for their quality, speculative nature, and ability to show off the vast realms of possibility inherent in the "What if?" of science fiction and alternate history, these stories shine and explore with all due enthusiasm, with nary a clunker in the bunch. This collection is well worth a look, and is another fine offering from Turtledove, who's been at the helm of several "Best of" anthologies recently.

***The Coming*, by Joe Haldeman, Ace, 278 pages, \$6.99, ISBN 0-441-00876-3**

In 2054, the world is a very different place, but not so far removed from the society we know today. Technology has improved in leaps and bounds with holography and computer intelligence, social studies has taken slightly different leanings, the government is a bit more corrupt, and homosexuality has been deemed illegal. A war is brewing between France and Germany, and skin cancer is on the rise. All this is overshadowed, however, when Professor Aurora "Rory" Bell, an astronomer with the University of Florida at Gainesville makes a stunning discovery. An alien object has appeared out of nowhere, traveling near the speed of light. Its destination: Earth. Date of arrival: January 1st, 2055. Its message: "We're coming." Nothing else.

Primary Ignition

Overnight, the world begins to spin out of control, and a rich ensemble of characters take the stage to present an intensely human, personal drama about the end of the world as we know it, the fear of the unknown, and the anticipation of what humanity dubs, "The Coming." With three months until the alien ship arrives, people prepare in different ways, embracing science, religion, fear, and hope. Rory and her musician husband Norman struggle to stay together as outside forces try to tear them apart. Political pressure coming from as far on high as the President herself seeks to silence Rory, or usurp her vision into a political and military advantage. Criminal elements seek to take advantage of the commotion, looking to black-mail the couple over Norman's proclivities, an affair of passion that, if revealed, could destroy their careers. Meanwhile, Rory's colleague may not be all that he seems, another is perfectly willing to sell her out, and everyone has a different opinion on what to do with the aliens. Embrace them? Destroy them?

As the Coming draws closer, war seems imminent, a shocking development cripples the American government, and the aliens' power demonstrates their overwhelming superiority. But is it all just an elaborate hoax, as some suspect, or are the aliens for real? Or is the truth even stranger than that? The answers will come only on January 1st, when they make their first—and last, maybe—appearance.

The Coming is without a doubt Haldeman's best book in quite a while, combining a keen grasp of social politics with a thorough understanding of human nature. This isn't so much a story of aliens or First Contact, as it is a story about people, and how they react. Utilizing a subtle, yet effective literary technique of linking narratives, in which each character hands off to the next as they encounter, talk to, deal with, and observe one another, Haldeman places the reader in the distinctly unique perspectives of over a dozen different people. And while some roles are less than others, they nevertheless serve as cunning links between events and experiences. Rory hands off to reporter Daniel Jordan who gives over to Norman Bell, who bumps into mobster Willy Joe Capra, who observes reporter Marya Washington conducting an interview on the 'cube', who meets Rory's assistant Pepe Parker, who's in the room when Rory gets a call from Gainesville's Mayor, and so forth, round-robing to tell a complete story about humanity.

Ultimately, *The Coming* manages to throw just enough curve balls to make the ending both unpredictable and not as obvious as it seems, just enough questions left unanswered to cast doubt on even the most concrete of character conclusions. But what's genuine is the message delivered at the end, and the process in which characters and readers alike get there. Sharply told, easily grasped without a PhD in physics, with believable characters and a plausible plot, this is a highly satisfying book, one that was over far too soon. While Haldeman has delivered books in the same vein before, with *Forever Free* and *Forever Peace* both dealing with the ideas of humanity, war, and peace, this is by far a superior story. This is definitely a don't miss for any reader of science fiction.

Review by Pamela Meek

***Shards of Honor*: by Lois McMaster Bujold. NESFA Press, 225 pages, hardcover, \$22.00; ISBN 1-886778-20-5**

Shards of Honor, written by Lois McMaster Bujold, was the first in a multiple Hugo award winning series. Reissued in hardcover for those of us whose paperbacks have been read to pieces, *Shards of Honor* is the story of Cordelia Naismith and Aral Vorkosigan; two people caught in a war neither believes in, struggling to protect their homes and way of life. Captivating characterization and riveting plot lines drive the book, enthralling the reader from beginning to end.

Shards of Honor opens when Cordelia and her survey crew, peacefully exploring a newly discovered planet, find themselves caught up in a ruthless political power play, beginning with a mutiny on the Barraryan ship *General Vorkraft*. Marooned on an unknown planet, members of her crew dead or badly injured, Cordelia finds herself a prisoner of war in the hands of the wounded Aral Vorkosigan, Captain of the *Vorkraft*. But all is not as it seems, Aral too is a victim of a different sort, caught in the barbed wire of his own honor. Armed only with oatmeal and blue cheese dressing, the two team up to make the brutal journey to a Barraryan depot 200 km across inhospitable terrain. Aral retakes his ship as Cordelia, with their home planets at war, finds herself increasingly caught between her growing love for Aral and her own honor. Events rapidly spiral out of control, culminating in a bloody denouement of treachery, political expediency and the slaughter of 5000 men. Unable to adapt to life at home, she ultimately rejoins

Aral on Barraryan, and plunges headfirst into the bitter, gruesome politics of a once primitive world caught in a viscous cycle of civil war, cultural upheaval and chaotic growth.

Shards of Honor is an intense and fascinating glimpse into a world struggling to pull itself from poverty and violence and into a galactic universe. The issues its characters struggle with are real, and the process of unraveling the political scheming gives the book unprecedented breadth. Cordelia's outsider viewpoint and anguished observations give empathy and shape to the violence. The richly depicted Barraryan cultural upheaval, fear and ultimate civil war result in a richly woven tapestry well worth reading, while merely a sample of the excellent series to come.

Reviews By John Deakins

***American Gods* by Neil Gaiman William Morrow/HarperCollins, 461 pages, \$26.00 ISBN: 0-380-97365-0**

Save time. Get on the bandwagon now. Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* will be in line for a pile of awards. It is one of the best books of the year.

Premise: Gods are created by the belief of their adherents and maintained by faith. What happens to substantive gods when the believers disappear?

Premise: Pre-Columbian America was visited in (at least) Egyptians, Phoenicians, Chinese, Basques, and Vikings, each remaining long enough to establish their gods. Lithuanians, Celts, and Arabs brought others from the old country before melting into the American pot. Native Americans rose, gave substance to gods, and then dwindled.

Premise: Though Americans deny belief in deities, they have unknowingly created modern "gods" through universal beliefs: Media; Technology; Men in Black. Now, there's going to be a war between the old and the new. Orphaned gods like Odin and Annubis will face off one last time against the black-helicopter minions of Mr. World.

Recruited straight out of prison by Mr. Wednesday (Think about the day's name.), Shadow arrives home just in time for his wife's funeral. Their love may have died, because of her infidelity, but she just won't stay dead personally. If he hadn't dropped that magic gold coin into her grave, the one he got from the leprechaun . . . That's a sample. Shadow goes everywhere, including places that aren't places. He helps Odin run an automatic-teller scam in Chicago. He

Absolute Magnitude

plays checkers with the Lithuanian death-hammer god, who agrees to kill him later, after the war. He dies (more or less) on the World Tree, keeping the eleven-day vigil for his dead father, who actually is... hmmm. He is a mortal, key figure in a final battle among immortals.

I can't say enough good things about Gaiman's effort. He has done the homework for an amazing amount of background. When he falters, he has the fortitude to listen to people who know the facts. Too many authors prefer their own ignorance to good advice. He includes a large number of descriptive passages—and they fit right in with an active, violent, sexy tale. Shadow's internal landscape is as important as the hidden world "next to" Lookout Mountain. (His soul is weighed in judgement in the Egyptian underworld, but he is dragged back to America anyway.)

Prepare for an "everything" book. You're gonna love this one.

American Empire: Blood and Iron by Harry Turtledove Del Rey Books/Ballantine Publishing, 567 pages, \$27.95 ISBN: 0-345-40565-X

Ignore all publicity releases for this book. Sure, this is more high-quality Turtledove alternate history. What it isn't is the first book of a new series. In *So Few Remain*, Turtledove introduced a world in which the South won at Antietam, won the Civil War, and defeated the U.S. again in the Second Mexican War about 1880. He began his "Great War" series with the North/Prussian alliance against the South/English/French allies in 1914. After three large volumes, the Germans won in Europe, and the manpower and logistics of the North overwhelmed Canada and the South. Turtledove followed twenty protagonists throughout the war, and even killed off a few.

Now (if you believe the publicity) he has begun a new series, as the next generation of embittered Southerners and wary Northerners go at it again. Undamaged Japanese, former German allies, and still-strong British may well be involved. Don't get your hopes up. Seventeen protagonists from the "Great War" series march on-stage without any break in storyline. Most exit again at the end. The reader does not reach the alternate World War II era. Another 500 pages sets up the next series, but it actually the fourth (or fifth) book of the "Great War" series. Somebody (maybe Turtledove's editors) must figure that readers can't count higher than three.

This book is another treat for Turtledove fans who have read the previous books. It will be somewhat of a mystery to those who haven't. The only sop thrown to the new reader, the one snared by "new series" advertising, is a paragraph synopsis of each character. Turtledove picks up the pace, covering more time than the three previous volumes together.

Hiding behind it all, historian Turtledove is yanking our chain. Those familiar with the rise of Adolf Hitler in the chaos of post-World-War-I Germany will witness the same events repeated in the defeated South. A charismatic, embittered veteran noncom creates a quasi-military hate organization against the background of gargantuan hyper-inflation, crushing reparations, unemployment, and angry despair. Sound familiar? "Sarge" Jake Featherston writes his own Confederate *Mein Kampf*, but his "Freedom" party is disgraced by the assassination of the Confederate president. Mirroring the Nazi's failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, the Freedom Party is knocked down, but not out. On that note, Turtledove ends his book on the most hopeful note of the series. There is wedding and bedding, politics and struggle. Children are born who will indeed live to see World War II. The good guys and girls get together, many of the Confederate problems are solved, the North is lead by a peace-loving Socialist regime. Everything looks as good for the world as it did in 1926. Remember what happened later? Turtledove asks the same question as this "new" series is launched.

The Year the Cloud Fell by Kurt R.A. Giambastiani Roc Books, 341 pages, \$25.00 ISBN: 0-7394-1744-4

Good writing entices the reader to stay up late or to think about a work at times when he/she can't be reading. Mr. Giambastiani is an excellent writer. His action scenes are well done, and he has a strong grasp of the lives and thoughts of the Great Plains Native Americans. And, yes, he did keep me up one night when I had to work the next day.

Nevertheless, poor Mr. Giambastiani has had the misfortune of encountering a reviewer who specializes in Native American fiction, fantasy, and alternate-history SF. He writes like a new author without a knowledgeable editor. His alternate-history premise is the size of a 747 (considerably too large to swallow), and he only hints at its explanation.

North America is missing all of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and the Gulf Coast. Since sea levels are identical to ours, a rising ocean couldn't have drowned the South.

(Some) dinosaurs still roam the Great Plains, north of a large maine gulf. (Perhaps the asteroid impact that produced the great extinction was smaller and further north.)

Though the author hints that dinosaurs survived only in North America, complex mammals (bison, horses) have still developed unhindered. European history has (incredibly) remained unchanged through the rise of modern colonial nations (England, France, Spain).

American history includes a Spanish Mexico and Southwest, a British Oregon and Canada, and a French Quebec. Nevertheless, momentum still seems to have brought a United States into existence, including many of the familiar state borders. Somehow a Civil War was still fought, even with most of the South is missing. A hero of that war and earlier Indian wars, George Custer, is president in 1886.

It is as if three trucks collided at an intersection in the dark: one carrying a Dinosaur Survival world; one carrying a Colonial Powers world; one carrying a Nineteenth Century United States world. Somehow, parts of each cargo were loaded onto Mr. Giambastiani's truck by mistake, and he drove off with them. Not that the author isn't a good driver, but his cargo looks pretty strange in the daylight.

The author is an expert on the Nineteenth Century Great Plains Cheyenne, but he evidently doesn't know that they were Algonquian speakers who originated east of the Mississippi. Though they ride iguanadons and allosaurs, though there was never a California Gold Rush or an Oregon Trail, even their history seems to have been forced into a lock-step leading to an 1880's confrontation with the whites. (And, by the way, I never heard of kissing among Native Americans.)

Alternate history is usually treated as a branch of science fiction, but the author can't rescue his plot without introducing strong fantasy elements. Visions and "thunder beings" are the Native American version of Swords-and-Sorcery.

George Custer, Jr., crashes his dirigible (Where did that aluminum come from again?) on the Plains, far from his cold, conniving father. He is eventually seduced by the nobility of his captors and wrests a Cheyenne victory from the treacherous whites. Never mind the weird background: That is all well written.

If you are not a nit-picking historical purist, this is a very enjoyable book. Leave it at that.

